

International

Hazaras fear for the future as foreign troops exit Afghanistan

In face of Taliban attacks, Hazaras were forced to take up arms

BAMIYAN, Afghanistan: The choice was straightforward for Hamidullah Asadi, a member of Afghanistan's minority Hazara community—wait for the next deadly attack or join a growing militia in the mountains. After spending months recovering from grave injuries inflicted by an Islamic State (IS) suicide bomber, he was ready to fight.

"We were forced to take up arms," said Asadi, now a spokesman for the Resistance for Justice Movement—a band of Hazara fighters based in the country's rugged, snow-capped central highlands.

"Our expectations of those who were supposed to defend us were not met." Afghan security forces are struggling to hold off an increasingly powerful Taliban as international troops withdraw from the country, with peace talks between the warring sides slow-moving.

Fearing the government will collapse and the country descend again into civil war, Hazaras are starting to prepare for the worst. Comprising roughly 10 to 20 percent of Afghanistan's 38-million population, Hazaras have long been persecuted for their largely Shiite faith by Sunni hardliners in a country wracked by deep ethnic divisions.

Asadi was a student at Kabul University in 2016 when he narrowly survived twin suicide blasts at a rally that killed over 80 people and marked the beginning of a new wave of violence targeting the Hazaras, including assaults claimed

by the Islamic State group. He says he is now one of thousands of armed fighters ready to be mobilized by a single call from their commander, Abdul Ghani Alipur, a popular Hazara figure with a Robin Hood reputation. The militia boasts of patrolling roads and launching brazen raids on Taliban areas to abduct the relatives of militants, later used as bargaining chips to release Hazara hostages.

The growth of the militia and similar armed outfits are increasingly problematic for the Afghan government, which is wary of allowing independent fighting forces to build up, but also fears a crackdown would ignite confrontation with the communities that support them.

Easy targets

The Hazaras have had few allies in Afghanistan over the generations and their distinct Asiatic features make them easy targets of hardline Sunnis. During the country's vicious civil war in the 1990s, they were mercilessly shelled in factional fighting and later massacred in the thousands amid the Taliban's ruthless conquest of the country. Few groups, however, have taken as much advantage of the new order established after the overthrow of Taliban rule.

The Hazaras flocked to enrol their children in schools—including their daughters—and entered the political arena in unprecedented numbers.

But those achievements remain fragile. The



KABUL: In this photo taken on January 14, 2021, Hazara men and women arrive to offer prayers for their relatives, members of the 'Enlightenment Movement', buried in a graveyard on the outskirts of Kabul. — AFP

group has increasingly taken the brunt of rising violence as IS suicide bombers attacked their mosques, schools, rallies and hospitals in western Kabul's Hazara enclave of Dasht-e-Barchi, killing hundreds. The Taliban have also kidnapped and killed Hazaras travelling on the country's perilous roads with near impunity. "Even with the presence of the US troops or NATO troops in Afghanistan, they were already vulnerable," said Sima Samar,

a leading activist and former head of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission.

Some Hazaras have fled the capital for the provinces, including Bamiyan—the Hazara homeland long considered one of Afghanistan's safest enclaves. Murad Ali Haidari hoped the move would shield his family from the violence; instead, Haidari's son was killed in one of two bombings in the region in November. —AFP

Indian farmers scrap march on parliament

NEW DELHI: Indian farmer unions have scrapped next week's planned march on parliament against new agricultural laws, as rifts emerge after violent protests in New Delhi left one person dead and almost 400 police injured. Thousands of farmers running riot on tractors on Tuesday was a major embarrassment for the government, but also for the 42 unions representing the farmers, who have mostly condemned the violence.

Late Wednesday their main umbrella group said that the planned march on parliament on February 1 — when the government presents the budget—had been pushed back, although nationwide rallies were still planned on Sunday. Farmers have been camped outside New Delhi for two months demanding that the new laws be scrapped, because they fear they will leave them at the mercy of big corporations.

Two roads blocked by the protestors for weeks were cleared late Wednesday as two unions withdrew from the protest, each blaming other groups for Tuesday's events.

"I am so ashamed and sad about (Tuesday) that I announce an end to our 58-day-long sit-in protest at this (Delhi) border," one union leader, Bhanu Pratap Singh, announced on Wednesday.

Another protest camp on the outskirts of the Indian capital was also cleared overnight, with local police denying claims that they had emptied the site using force. At another site, Ghazipur, there was an increased police presence yesterday. The main protest camp at the Singhu border crossing remained packed with pro-



NEW DELHI: Farmers listen to a speaker during a protest against the central government's recent agricultural reforms, at the Delhi-Haryana state border in Singhu on Wednesday. —AFP

testors, although some have left and the mood was somber. "Yes, many people left as they were disappointed about Tuesday but we are still here, and hope they will be back," Baljinder Singh, 32, from the northern state of Punjab, told AFP on Wednesday.

"It was a minor blip. The government planned it and changed the direction of our tractor march, and they intentionally directed us towards the city centre," Baljinder added. Delhi police have signalled a tough line, saying they are studying footage and using face-recognition technology to identify and arrest those involved in the violence. On Wednesday police commissioner SN Shrivastava said that the farmer unions, having promised that Tuesday's tractor rallies would stick to agreed routes, had "backstabbed" the authorities. —AFP

Foreigners without face masks punished with push-ups in Bali

DENPASER: Foreigners caught not wearing face masks on the Indonesian resort island of Bali are being subject to an unusual punishment: push-ups. Video footage circulating on social media this week shows tourists in T-shirts and shorts being made to do the exercise in sweltering tropical heat as masked security officials stood over them. Bali authorities made wearing a face mask in public mandatory last year as Indonesia battled a raging COVID-19 outbreak. In recent days, however, scores of foreigners have been caught without face coverings, said security official Gusti Agung Ketut Suryanegara. More than 70 people paid a fine of 100,000 rupiah (\$7), but about 30 others said they did not have the cash. Instead, they were ordered to do push-ups.

Those not carrying a mask had to do up to 50, while those who were wearing one improperly were punished with 15. "At first, they would claim that they didn't know the regulation," Suryanegara told AFP. "Then they said they forgot, or that the mask was wet or damaged."

Some Indonesians on the island, which is a pocket of Hinduism in the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, have also been hit with the unusual punishment. Bali's authorities have also warned that foreigners who break virus regulations could be thrown out of the country, although so far there have no reports of anyone being deported for failing to wear a mask. The island, which has been hammered by the epidemic, remains officially closed to overseas tourists but is home to many long-term residents from abroad. —AFP