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Chair: Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Good morning to you all.

Welcome to meeting number 35 of the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[Translation]

Today's meeting is taking place in hybrid format. Members can participate in person in the room or remotely using the Zoom application.

To ensure that the meeting runs smoothly, I'd like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and members.

[English]

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking.

For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike and please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

There is interpretation. For those on Zoom, you have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

[Translation]

When members present in the room wish to speak, they must raise their hand. Those on Zoom should use the "raise hand" function. The committee clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can, and we appreciate your patience and understanding in this regard.

[English]

In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests for witnesses, I am informing the committee that all witnesses have completed the required connection test in advance of the meeting.

Today we are meeting to resume our study of the situation of the Hazaras in Afghanistan. It is my pleasure to welcome the witnesses who have joined us this morning.

We have Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahim, senior lecturer, international relations, La Trobe University, who is here as an individual, by video conference from Australia; Shabnam Salehi, visiting lecturer

and researcher, University of Ottawa; and, from the Canadian Hazara Advocacy Group, Dr. Tahir Shaaran.

Each one of you will have five minutes for your intervention.

[Translation]

Subcommittee members will then be able to ask you questions. I'll let you know when one minute of your time is remaining.

[English]

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahim, the floor is yours for five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahim (Senior Lecturer, International Relations, La Trobe University, As an Individual): Hello. Good morning. Thank you, Chair and members of the committee, all participants and my co-witnesses in this particular session of the Canadian House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights.

In my five minutes, I will make three main remarks based primarily on the written testimony I submitted to this committee, together with Dr. William Maley and Dr. Melissa Chiovenda, in May of this year. Let me highlight three of the points we were making in that particular written testimony. I would be quite happy to elaborate on any of those points in the questions and answers.

First, the Hazaras in Afghanistan are a distinct ethnic and religious group. They are one of several ethnocultural groups that constitute the population of Afghanistan. The Hazaras are identified by a shared belief in a common ancestry in association with an ancestral homeland called Hazarajat, or Hazaraistan. They are also generally identified by their central Asian phenotype, which distinguishes them from the rest of the population of Afghanistan. The Hazaras are also predominantly followers of Shia Islam. As a result, they are a religious minority in a country of predominantly Sunni Muslims. They also speak a distinctive dialect of Dari or Persian in Afghanistan.

All of these features constitute the Hazaras as a distinctive ethnic and religious group under international law, especially within the context of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

While these features distinguish the Hazaras from other ethnic and cultural groups in Afghanistan as a sociological reality, these features have also been the reasons that the Hazaras have been the target of genocide, systematic persecution and displacement over several decades in Afghanistan.

This brings me to the second point that I would like to bring to your attention, members of the committee. During the years of the formation of the modern Afghan state under the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan from 1880 to 1901, several wars and violence targeted different groups in Afghanistan. One of the major episodes of conflict in Afghanistan from 1891 to 1893 targeted the Hazaras. That war, known as the Hazaras War, resulted in what would be a textbook example of genocide under international law in Afghanistan.

I have documented and provided a detailed examination of that case in my book, which is entitled *The Hazaras and the Afghan State: Rebellion, Exclusion and the Struggle for Recognition*. It was published in 2017 by Hurst & Co. in London.

Let me quickly highlight some of the features of that genocide, that war on the Hazaras.

That war included a declaration of jihad, a holy war, on the Hazaras, which was officially sanctioned by the Government of Afghanistan under the leadership of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan. It was spread throughout Afghanistan by clerics and religious leaders who were also employed by the state. The war also involved a mass displacement of the Hazaras and slavery of the Hazaras. It resulted in the emergence of a flourishing trade in Hazaras slaves in Afghanistan.

More than a century later in Afghanistan, in recent years we have also seen a resurgence of similar patterns of persecution of the Hazaras in Afghanistan. We have seen in recent years a pattern of systematic attacks on Hazaras places of worship and educational centres and on cultural and religious figures in Afghanistan. Since August of 2021, with the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan, the Hazaras have been systematically marginalized and persecuted politically, culturally and economically.

In recent years we have seen a mass displacement of Hazaras from their ancestral homelands in several provinces of Afghanistan, including Daykundi, Ghazni, Balkh and several other parts of Afghanistan.

• (1110)

The Chair: Excuse me. Could you wrap up, please? The time is almost up.

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahim: Yes.

All of this, I think, brings us to the fact that the Hazaras are not only the victims of a genocide that was quite well documented in Afghanistan historically; there is also at present the danger of a genocide and atrocities targeting the Hazaras under the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. The Taliban as well as other groups, such as Islamic State Khorasan, are committing a series of acts of violence and mass atrocities that are specifically targeted towards the Hazaras and indicate an intention to destroy the Hazaras in whole and in part as an ethnic and religious group in Afghanistan.

Therefore, I would like to call on the Canadian House of Parliament to recognize the Hazaras genocide as a genocide and to show leadership in a process of recognition of this as part of a genocide.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Ibrahim.

• (1115)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Salehi, welcome.

You now have the floor.

[*English*]

Ms. Shabnam Salehi (Visiting Lecturer and Researcher, University of Ottawa, As an Individual): Thank you so much.

Chair and members of the committee, today I stand before you to address a complex and troubling chapter in the history of Afghanistan that continues to haunt us.

I am a researcher dedicated to issues of law, human rights and scholarship, and it is my duty to unravel the intricate threads of history, analyze its lessons, and apply this knowledge to advocate for human rights.

The late nineteenth century brought significant transformation to Afghanistan. It was a time when power dynamics shifted from a decentralized tribal monarchy to a centralized one. Amir Abdur Rahman played a pivotal role in this transformation as he embarked on a ruthless campaign to bolster his authority. His objective was clear: to eliminate any perceived threats to his monarchy, be they ethnic chiefs or individuals in positions of power who might challenge him. In his pursuit of power, he employed a range of strategies, from deploying religious arguments to wielding tribal and even brute force. None, regardless of their ethnic or religious background, were spared from these methods.

While some people found protection, others, including groups of people of the Hazaras, Pashtuns, Tajiks, Nuristanis and various other ethnic groups, were marginalized, punished and subjected to oppressive rule. The atrocities committed against the Afghans, including the Hazara people and other ethnic groups, cast a sombre shadow over our history, raising the question of whether it was a genocide or a brutal campaign against all.

It is here that I must address a critical debate surrounding this dark chapter. Some argue that applying the term "genocide" to these killings would be retroactive, as the concept of genocide didn't exist at the time these events occurred. They contend that it would be inappropriate to retroactively apply a modern legal concept to historical events that took place before its formulation and establishment.

Others argue that Amir Abdur Rahman Khan's campaign against all whom he considered a threat to his power consolidation, including the killing of Hazaras, may not meet the legal definition of genocide as defined by the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. They maintain that the killings, while undoubtedly brutal and a gross violation of human rights, were not motivated essentially by ethnic, religious and racial hatred; a defining characteristic of genocide.

In conclusion, history is a multi-faceted and complicated tapestry, demanding a meticulous examination and profound understanding of context and contributing factors. It serves as a sombre reminder of how power can be misused through religious and other means.

As we strive for a more just and equitable world, further critical examination of history is essential. It requires experts well versed in historical intricacies to determine whether the term “genocide” is appropriate in this context and what may offer appropriate remedies.

Simultaneously, the establishment of an accountability mechanism that provides justice to victims from diverse ethnicities and groups who have endured unspeakable abuse and atrocities serves as a vital stepping stone toward sustainable peace. In our pursuit of justice and human rights it is imperative to remember the lessons of the past and to learn from them. We must strive to ensure that such atrocities never happen again, regardless of the terminology we use. The guidance offered by history should lead us toward a more just and equitable world in which human rights are cherished and protected above all else.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Salehi.

Now I invite Dr. Tahir Shaaran.

[*Translation*]

The floor is yours.

[*English*]

Dr. Tahir Shaaran (Canadian Hazara Advocacy Group): Honourable Chair, esteemed members of the committee and ladies and gentlemen, I stand before you today to address a matter of utmost importance: the ongoing atrocity against the Hazara community and ethnic and religious groups deeply rooted in Afghanistan.

For over a century, the Hazaras have faced unrelenting human rights violations, resulting in what can only be described as a prolonged ongoing genocide spanning 130 years. The Hazara community has faced various atrocities, including ethnic cleansing, land confiscation, and institutional subjugation. Shedding light on the denial of fundamental human rights, such as the right to life, freedom of religion, social connections, education and government employment, is crucial.

In 1978, the Hazaras gained a degree of freedom and political participation. However, the rise of the Taliban in 1994 marked the onset of a new era of oppression, characterized by heart-wrenching massacres.

Despite their suffering, the Hazaras have shown a firm commitment to peace and security. They have supported the peace process and have stood alongside the international community since 2001.

Hazaras have actively participated in the democratic process, including making significant contributions to elections since 2001. They have demonstrated resilience and dedication to education and peace, resulting in minimal violence in the region and no attack on international forces since 2001. However, with the return of the Taliban to power, Hazaras now face rapidly escalating targeted attacks, forced displacement, summary executions and mass atrocities, amounting to a systematic genocide characterized by intentional displacement and killings.

The ongoing atrocity against the Hazara community can be divided into four critical periods.

In the 1890s, under Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, the Hazaras faced devastating losses. With over 60% of their population massacred, tens of thousands were sold into slavery and a forced migration reshaped and altered our geography. Approximately 400,000 Hazara families were displaced, with 80% of them either losing their lives or becoming slaves.

During the 1990s, nearly 10 mass killings occurred, including the Afshar Kabul massacre in 1993 and the Mazar-i-Sharif massacre in 1998, resulting in thousands of Hazara casualties.

Between 2002 and 2022, the Hazara community faced 294 documented incidents of targeted violence, resulting in thousands of dead and injured. These attacks took place in various settings, from maternity wards to places of worship and schools. Additionally, Hazaras endured institutional discrimination, under-representation in government jobs and the controversial 500-kilovolt transmission line project, further contributing to their ongoing suffering.

With the return of the Taliban, hundreds of Hazaras have been killed and thousands displaced, and the number of Hazara government employees has been significantly decreased. International aid has been diverted from the region, while Hazara employment in international organizations has declined.

Recent examples include the attack on the Kaaj Educational Center in west Kabul, the systematic murder of 17 Hazara civilians in Khas Urozgan, an attack on the mosque in Pol-e-Khomri a week earlier, and the forced displacement of several hundred families in Daykundi province. Fabricated documents have been used to seize Hazaras' lands across the Hazarajat during the Pashtun Kuchi nomads' conflict with local Hazara residents. The Taliban imposed various taxes on Hazaras in the countryside, pushing them to leave their homes.

The evidence indicates that the Hazara community in Afghanistan is currently experiencing genocide, as defined by the convention, through acts like killing, deportation and forcible population transfers. It is crucial that we take immediate action to address the ongoing atrocities against the Hazara community and prevent further suffering.

Finally, on behalf of our community, I express my gratitude to this Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the House of Commons for addressing the ongoing atrocity against Hazaras. Your attention to this pressing issue is greatly appreciated.

Thank you very much.

● (1120)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Shaaran.

Now I will open the floor for the questions. Every member has seven minutes for the first round.

[Translation]

Mr. Genuis, you have seven minutes.

[English]

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here and for your important testimony.

I'll start this question with Dr. Ibrahimi, but maybe the other witnesses will want to weigh in on it as well.

What is the nature of the Taliban discourse towards Shia Islam in general? To what extent is generalized Shia persecution part of the persecution of Hazaras, or do you see it as more of an ethnically targeted persecution?

• (1125)

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahimi: Thank you for that question, which I think really goes into the heart of what is happening at the moment under the Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

As we know, historically the Taliban are a group that embraces two different types of tendencies in Afghanistan. One is an extremist interpretation of Islam in which Shia Islam is not regarded as a legitimate sect within the broader Islamic community. Second, the Taliban also embraces a particularly violent and exclusionary form of ethnic nationalism in Afghanistan, which I have recently discussed in an article that was published by *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*.

I think what is happening now in Afghanistan with regard to the Hazaras is that those two types of tendencies and forces are coming together. One is a religious tendency that is very strong; it goes back to the 1990s. The Taliban leaders have quite frequently made it quite clear that they do not see Shias as on par with Sunni Muslims in Afghanistan.

We have seen that in their policies on marginalizing Shias, deliberately excluding Shias from being taught at the university—for example, in a Hazara Shia majority area such as Bamiyan, where there is a university that was teaching Shia jurisprudence. The Taliban have also systematically removed all Shia judges from the courts across Afghanistan. At the moment, as we speak, there is not a single Shia judge anywhere in Afghanistan. That is also being reinforced by this historical tendency of land grabbing, which is something that was already mentioned by another witness, Dr. Shaaran. There is an ongoing pattern of land grabbing and violence towards the Hazaras, which is also backed by the Taliban leaders through their nominal court proceedings as well.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

Do other witnesses want to weigh in on the question about the religious persecution component?

Dr. Tahir Shaaran: I want to add that what Dr. Ibrahimi mentioned about the Taliban ideology toward the Hazaras is true. They see Hazaras as infidels, and that's why we have a lot of examples in the past. When they took Mazar-i-Sharif—I was a young kid at that time—they killed more than 8,000 Hazaras, according to some records, while some recorded up to 5,000—based on their religion

and ethnicity. I think this is something that, at least to our community, is very obvious. A lot of international human rights organizations also actually agree on that matter.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I have another question for you, Ms. Salehi. Maybe I'll ask that, and then you can answer both together if you'd like.

Parliament often recognizes acts of genocide. Those are seen as particularly important in the context of contemporary events. At the same time, we have not typically recognized historical genocides before a certain point, not because genocides haven't happened for a very long time in human history but because it's potentially more fraught for parliamentary committees and for parliamentarians to evaluate questions of history. At the same time, I think we are more likely to recognize those historical genocides if there is a contemporary resonance. I think of the Armenian genocide as one example of a past event that feels very immediate because of current events.

Could you speak about why it's important for us to evaluate, in the context of present events, this historical question of the 19th-century genocide that you spoke of?

Ms. Shabnam Salehi: I totally echo my two fellows on the Taliban, specifically on the Shia. When it comes to the recent events, I see it more from the ISIS side than the Taliban side. Every incident and every suicide bombing that's happened was claimed by ISIS. You can find the documents. That's the thing I acknowledge on that. There should be an accountability mechanism to find the truth.

I found it more anti-Shia than anti-Hazara. When some of our Shia countrymen were equipped and recruited by Iran under the Fatemiyoun and then sent to Syria to fight against ISIS, ISIS at that time told us it would take revenge against the Shia. I see all of that as anti-Shia, rather than anti-Hazara, because we have a lot of Hazaras who are not Shia and who are not a target. We also have a lot of Shia who are also not Hazara, and they are targeted. That's the one point I want to mention.

On the other point that you told us, as lawyers, we have a principle: The law is enforced and the law is applicable to all events that happened after the enforcement of the special law. However, if you go to historical events, it's impossible to really document them. There are a lot of crimes in history. We wouldn't find a limit to how far we can go to reinvestigate this kind of incident.

As a lawyer, that's very difficult for me—

• (1130)

The Chair: Wrap up your answer, please.

Ms. Shabnam Salehi: I work at the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. We documented the crimes that happened from 1980 up until 2001. We documented all of the crimes, but transitional justice didn't happen because there are a lot of complex ethnic, religious....

We can't apply it just to recent events and it's impossible to somehow apply it just to the historical events. That's my point of view.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Chair, if I may, I'll ask just one short clarification question. Were you saying ISIS or ISI?

Ms. Shabnam Salehi: It was ISIS.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay. It's important we get that clarified. Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis and Ms. Salehi.

[English]

Dr. Ibrahim, I'm sorry. After finishing the first round, I will give you the floor.

Ali Ehsassi, you have the floor for seven minutes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm very grateful.

Allow me to start off by thanking all the witnesses.

If I could pick up where Mr. Genuis left off, Ms. Salehi, I listened to your testimony very closely and I have to say I'm quite disturbed by the legal interpretation that you adhere to. From what I heard, you stated that genocide can only occur prospectively, after the concept was crystalized or after the genocide convention was adopted in 1948. I have never in my life come across any scholar who has held to such a definition.

Why would you state that? You are saying that genocide did not take place by the Nazis or genocide did not take place against Armenians. That's a very disturbing interpretation that is not supported by any academic research.

Please respond to that.

Ms. Shabnam Salehi: I didn't say that was not genocide. I'm mostly in the terminology. In the law, we have a principle. That principle is—

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: It's the terminology, but you admit that genocide could have taken place prior to 1944.

Ms. Shabnam Salehi: Yes, but we, as lawyers, can't use the terminology of genocide for it. We can use "crime against humanity"—

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Genocide is a concept; it's not terminology.

Ms. Shabnam Salehi: It's a concept, but it was formulated and established in 1948, so before that—

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: The convention came about, but that doesn't mean the concept wasn't around before 1944.

Ms. Shabnam Salehi: The concept was, yes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Do you know of any other scholar who holds to the view that you—

Ms. Shabnam Salehi: There are a lot of scholars. I can send a lot of references to you.

That law can't be retroactively applied to all the incidents that happened—

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: The convention, yes, but not the concept.

Ms. Shabnam Salehi: The convention is the law.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: In any event, you agree that there has been systematic persecution of the Hazaras since the early 20th century. You agree with that. Is that correct?

• (1135)

Ms. Shabnam Salehi: Yes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: You agree that there have been mass atrocities, correct?

Ms. Shabnam Salehi: Yes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Okay. Thank you.

Dr. Shaaran, it has been very, very difficult since 2021. I'm wondering how things are proceeding currently in Afghanistan. Would you agree that gender apartheid is being committed by the Taliban and that the Hazaras are victims of that?

Dr. Tahir Shaaran: I agree with that. Unfortunately, under the Taliban in Afghanistan there is clearly gender apartheid and ethnic apartheid. It's not just gender apartheid. It's both, unfortunately.

If we are saying that the Taliban are different from Daesh, this is arguable. In 1998, if there weren't any Daesh at that time, why were 8,000 Hazaras killed in Mazar-i-Sharif and thousands killed in Bamiyan, the city I was born in? Apart from that, the Daesh emerged in 2008. There has been a genocide of the Hazaras and they have been attacked in their mosques and their schools since 2002.

Furthermore, the Taliban keep telling the international community that there is no Daesh in Afghanistan and that there is no terrorist group acting in Afghanistan. If there is no terrorist group, why is there suicide bombing in our community every day, and targeting of our schools, where hundreds of our kids get killed and hundreds of our kids get displaced? If they are saying they are not Daesh, then who are they? If they are Daesh, then they're responsible, because they are in control of this country right now. They are in control of the safety and security of the people. That is one concern.

In terms of apartheid, I can add more. Hazaras women have been affected more than any other community because of gender apartheid. Over the last 20 years, as I mentioned, in the Hazaras community there was actually a pro-democratic process. Hazaras women, compared with any other ethnic group, actually participated in the democratic process, including elections and so on. That's why they have been affected more than any other people in Afghanistan, unfortunately, due to the Taliban's apartheid policy against women.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

You touched on the issue of displacement that is taking place for the Hazaras community in Afghanistan. Could you give us a sense of the scale of the challenge over the course of the past three or four years?

Dr. Tahir Shaaran: I have submitted a very long study on this issue in the Etlaat newspaper on the displacement of Hazaras. You can clearly see that hundreds of Hazaras families have been displaced over two years.

In the place I was born, in Qarghanato in Bamiyan province, last year no one in my place could take their livestock to pasture. The Taliban wouldn't let them. Unfortunately, there are thousands of falsified documents making allegations against the lands of the Hazaras. With the Taliban, anyone can claim, under the names of nomads and Kuchis, that 40 years ago, for instance, this was their land. I can actually read much of that. I have a lot of reports, if you have the time. I have already submitted that. I can give you a clear example on much of that.

I will give you one example. In Nawur last year, a young Kuchi came to the Taliban and said that 20 years ago their son was injured by the Afghan army, and now the Hazaras community should pay them around one million afghani as compensation. You have blood money compensation and many other things. I have a lot of records that I can give to the committee, if you want.

Unfortunately, this is something that's ongoing. This is not something new. This was carried on in the past in the Hazaras community, but now they have the support of the Taliban. Anyone can come and claim and have a dispute against the Hazaras and then take their land.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you very much for that. I'm out of time.

Thank you, Chair.

[Translation]

The Chair: I now give the floor to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for seven minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Salehi, I, too, was a little surprised to hear what you had to say. My colleague Mr. Ehsassi summed up what I was thinking. If I understand your theory correctly, given that the genocide convention was ratified in 1948, anything that occurred earlier cannot be considered genocide.

Are you telling us that Canada erred in recognizing the Armenian genocide and the Ukrainian genocide, known as the Holodomor?

According to your theory, was this a mistake on Canada's part?

• (1140)

[English]

Ms. Shabnam Salehi: Well, I can't say that Canada is wrong, but as a legal expert, that's my interpretation of the principle of retroactivity. I interpret it in that way, and there are a lot of lawyers that say—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much, Ms. Salehi.

I've just heard that it may have been a mistake to recognize the Armenian genocide. I could have fallen off my chair when I heard that, if it didn't have arms.

Mr. Ibrahim, we're going to talk about the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted in 1948. Article II of the Convention describes genocide as a crime

“committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”

Is what happened to the Hazaras in Afghanistan between 1891 and 1893 consistent with Article II, which I've just read?

[English]

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahim: Thank you for that question.

I think we have determined that in the testimony we have sent already, I think in May of this year. We have applied article 2 and article 3 of the convention to the situation of the Hazaras, which claims that genocide is any of the “acts committed” towards “a specific ethnic, racial or religious group” and “committed with the intent to destroy” the group “in whole or in part”.

We should also remember that the whole group should not be destroyed for us to claim that a genocide happened, right? What is important is that there should be an “intent” or conspiracy to commit that sort of crime for there to be a case made for a genocide. I think that if you look at it historically, there are several episodes of violence towards the Hazaras that we can clearly justify calling “genocide”.

I think that the events of 1891 to 1893 are on a par with what happened to the Armenians during the First World War in terms of intensity and scope. Of course, as we know, not all Armenians were killed, but that is one of the most widely established historical cases of genocide. I think the Hazaras, as is commonly believed, lost 62% of their population during those three years alone. Then you have August 1998, in which up to 8,000 Hazaras were killed during a period of about one week.

Then, over the years, you can also see similar things happening and again link them. I think there is plenty of evidence that there is now, as we speak, an intention to destroy the Hazaras “in whole or in part”. I think we can look at all those incidents and put them all together: attacks on maternity wards, attacks on educational centres and attacks on women. Often in many of those schools, there are attacks on young Hazara girls. I think all of this really clearly symbolizes an intent on the part of these groups to commit genocide on the Hazaras.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much, Mr. Ibrahim.

Mr. Shaaran, what would it mean for the Hazaras, wherever they live, whether in Canada or Afghanistan, if the committee came to the conclusion that there was indeed a genocide between 1891 and 1893? What effect would that have on the Hazaras in their communities in Canada and the rest of the world?

[English]

Dr. Tahir Shaaran: If you recognize that this was genocide, I think this is very important not just for the Hazaras but important for all of humanity. In general, as a community, we have been suffering for over 130 years. We've experienced ongoing genocide and still are experiencing it. I think this would mean a lot.

We actually wanted to prevent that, just as Dr. Ibrahim mentioned. Then we had the head of the international Genocide Watch, Dr. Gregory Stanton, at one of the conferences, and in his statement he mentioned that it's very important to take action to prevent further atrocity against the Hazara community.

I think whatever kind of action takes place, especially in this committee and the House of Commons, would be greatly appreciated by the Hazaras and by all humankind, in terms of preventing further atrocities against people, because nowadays we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow for the Hazaras. It doesn't matter where you are. If you live in Kabul, in Mazar or in Hazarajat, you don't know if tomorrow your relatives will die or under what kinds of circumstances or conditions.

I think that for us this is a really appreciated and important action to be taken. It actually will help us a lot to end our suffering, at least, and will put more pressure on the Taliban and on other people. A lot of people think we don't have any leverage against the Taliban, but I'm saying, no, with the international community, there's huge leverage.

The Taliban will listen to you, but you have to take action. If you take it, then this is going to put value on that and put pressure on the Taliban to at least prevent further atrocities.

• (1145)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Shaaran.

I'd like to use my remaining time to point out to the analysts that a witness said that it might have been a mistake to recognize the Armenian genocide and the Holodomor. I therefore ask the analysts to pay close attention to her testimony when the time comes to write the report.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*English*]

Now I invite Ms. McPherson to speak. You have the floor for seven minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here today.

I want to start by expressing my deep sympathy for the people of Afghanistan and the Hazara community on the recent earthquakes that have happened in Afghanistan. I know that it must feel like the world is looking elsewhere at the moment and is not recognizing the death and destruction that we are seeing in Afghanistan. I'm deeply sorry for that.

I also want to acknowledge the impact of Pakistan's deportation on Afghans, on the Hazara people and on Afghan refugees who are fleeing violence. I know that this is more impactful on those who are being persecuted under the Taliban regime. I don't want you to think that people in Afghanistan have been forgotten, because you have not been.

My first question is for you, sir.

You just talked about the need to call out the genocidal actions of the Taliban and the genocide that is happening against the Hazara people. I'm worried, because I don't have the same optimism that you have expressed that the Taliban is listening to us. We have seen constant attacks on women's rights and on minority groups like the Hazaras. There have been violent murders and behaviour by the Taliban towards minority groups.

Why do you think they are listening or paying attention? Can you give me some more hope, please, that this is the case?

Dr. Tahir Shaaran: There are two things.

First, with regard to whether the Taliban are listening or not, I think they will listen, and I will elaborate on that. With regard to the Hazara genocide recognition as a whole for humankind, I think the atrocity is just ongoing, and it needs to be recognized at an international level. That is what our community in Canada and elsewhere wants to happen.

In terms of listening.... Since the last attack that we had last year on our education centre back in Kabul where 57 girls, mainly under 19 years old, were killed, unfortunately, we actually had a "Stop Hazara Genocide" campaign. We had demonstrations across the globe in 130 cities and in more than 50 or 60 countries. We then had #StopHazaraGenocide, which was retweeted more than 15 million times on Twitter. Actually, when we were back in contact in Afghanistan, we realized that the Taliban were actually taking things seriously. Over the last year, fortunately, we haven't had any attacks on this kind of a scale, but they changed their strategy. Now there is ongoing genocide in terms of forced displacement and individual targeting, not directly targeting their schools or mosques.

Unfortunately, just recently—a week ago—a bomb was exploded in one of the Hazara mosques in northern Afghanistan, and 30 people were killed. I mentioned this in my statement.

This is something that I can see is important for them, because at the end of the day, they are actually wanting to.... The international community is somehow having traction with them at some level. I think that this will have an impact.

Ms. Heather McPherson: One of my questions—to follow up quickly, and then I'll pass it back to our other two witnesses—is this: What else does Canada need to do? I know that we've struggled to get the legislation in place to make sure that the aid can go there. That has gone through, albeit not in a perfect manner. What other steps would you like to see us take? What other steps should the international community be taking at this time to protect the Hazaras and even more to protect that intersectionality? We know that the Hazaras are deeply impacted, but Hazara women are even more impacted, of course, under the Taliban. It's that intersectionality where we see journalists, lawyers, members of Parliament.... It's the intersectionality of being part of a minority group and part of one of the most attacked groups in Afghanistan.

• (1150)

Dr. Tahir Shaaran: Our people are really thankful in general to Canada, because in this difficult situation the contribution you make in international aid to Afghanistan is enormous compared to that of any other country.

One thing, however, is important. Unfortunately the policy on the ground is such that international aid gets diverted from the Hazaras. I already submitted a few files that you can go through. The local people in Bamiyan and Daykundi sent their complaints to the international community about how the aid that was supposed to come to our area was shifted to other provinces and other places.

I think we need to make sure the international organizations that are actually providing aid in Afghanistan are accountable. They have to make sure that the aid is distributed equally among all individual groups in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, that hasn't happened over the past 20 years. Even with the existence of the international community, the Hazara community was marginalized in comparison with any other ethnic group or other community in Afghanistan in terms of receiving international aid.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Miss Salehi, I strongly disagree with what you have said on genocide. I think that it's very painful for many members of different communities to hear. I'm not going to ask you some of those questions. Certainly I agree with my colleague from the Bloc that we should be considering that when we consider your testimony.

However, I do know that you have some expertise with regard to women's rights and protecting the rights of women in Afghanistan and that you actually did implement interventions. Can you talk a little bit about the policies that were enacted to support and protect Hazara women?

Ms. Shabnam Salehi: With regard to gender persecution or gender apartheid in Afghanistan, it's all over Afghanistan, especially when it comes to intersectionality. Marginalized groups like the Hazaras and other women are the most targeted at this time.

I think the only hope that Afghani women have right now is the international community, which can force the Taliban to somehow reverse their gender policies in Afghanistan. That's the only thing I see—that the international community would force the Taliban to somehow reverse their policies.

I just want to make one correction. I didn't say that Canada didn't do the right thing; I just gave my interpretation of the principle. We have this principle, and that's my interpretation as a lawyer.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Miss Salehi.

Thank you, Miss McPherson.

Now I believe Dr. Ibrahim has something to say to the committee.

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahim: Thank you, Chair.

I would like to make a quick point on the question of whether or not the Taliban are listening. I think the Taliban have not been listening for the past two years, partly because of the mixed messaging they have been receiving from the international community.

Until very recently, the situation of women in Afghanistan was not really at the top of the international agenda. Given the intensity and systematic nature of violence towards women in Afghanistan, I think it still does not receive as much attention as it should have from the international community.

I think the situation of groups such as the Hazaras in Afghanistan is not at the top of the international agenda. I think one thing Canada can consider doing is to recognize the nature of the situation in Afghanistan with regard to people like the Hazaras.

They can also use and support international mechanisms for documenting and supporting international investigations. I think human rights groups for many years have also been calling for independent investigation mechanisms created by the UN Human Rights Council. I think that would be one step, and supporting investigations by the International Criminal Court, for example, would be another.

Afghanistan has been a state party to the International Criminal Court since 2003, and there is an ongoing investigation, but the investigation hasn't really been making much progress. I think there is a need for international attention to place human rights and mass atrocity prevention at the centre of international engagement with regard to Afghanistan.

Thank you.

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Ibrahim.

Now we go to the second round. I believe time is running out. I would like to invite Madame Vandebeld to take the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Anita Vandebeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): I'll share my time with Ms. Damoff.

Before I begin my question, I want to note, because of the previous discussion, that in the preamble of the genocide convention of 1948 it says, "Recognizing that at all periods of history genocide has inflicted great losses on humanity..." It's right in the genocide convention.

However, my question is not about that. My question is for Mr. Shaaran.

We have focused a lot now on what has happened in the past and the atrocities that have happened in the past. I think one of the things our committee can do is make visible and amplify atrocities that are happening today in order to prevent them from happening further tomorrow.

I'm wondering if you could tell us what you would like to see this committee focus on in our statement and our recommendations, and about how we make visible what is happening to the Hazaras right now. Unfortunately, it is not on the front page of the newspapers, and it should be.

If you could give us maybe one recommendation you think we should have in our report, I'll then pass the time to Ms. Damoff.

Dr. Tahir Shaaran: Thank you.

I think it is very important to have a special desk for Hazaras' human rights currently, because we need to monitor them. At the moment, having direct access on the ground is not easy. For example, when I'm in contact with many people to get the right message, there are people who are scared for their life. It is very difficult. Even though my sources on the ground trust me, it's not always easy. They can actually risk their life by sending a text message or something to report something.

I think it's very important to have a desk allocated specifically to the human rights situation in Afghanistan generally, and particularly to the Hazaras—

The Chair: Could you please wrap it up?

Dr. Tahir Shaaran: —to monitor what is going on on the ground.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Vandenbeld.

[Translation]

Ms. Damoff, you now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

[English]

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you.

Thanks to all the witnesses for being here.

Dr. Shaaran, I'm a little confused by something you were saying about aid being diverted from the region. It sounds like this is not something that's been just since the Taliban took over in the country. It was prior to that, so I'm a bit confused.

We have Canadian aid organizations that are working in Afghanistan and have been for quite some time. Why would Canadian aid organizations be diverting aid from the region?

Dr. Tahir Shaaran: I'm not saying it's just Canada, but unfortunately the way it works.... If you look at the last 20 years, the international community mainly focused on different regions. For example, the Canadian focus was in Kandahar. The American focus was somewhere else, and then they were in Kabul and the rest. The Germans were in Mazar-i-Sharif. In Hazarajat, you had just New Zealand.

Money that was used to contribute to the development of Afghanistan wasn't much compared to other countries. If you look thoroughly at the amount of money that went to our community over the last 20 years, when the international community was there, it is very tiny compared to other areas. That's what I was saying.

At the moment, that is happening again. For example, I have a report, and I just submitted a letter from the local people as well. The international community allocated money for Bamiyan, for example, to 10 districts. However, somehow the locals, because they have to work under the Taliban.... The Taliban put on a lot of pressure and said, "Okay, the only way you can operate is if you divert this project to now go to this province, not here."

This is what I mean by international aid being diverted from the Hazara community now. This is the pressure because of the Taliban. Even the international community cannot contribute its aid to

the local people. It is very hard. It has to bargain with the Taliban. They say, "Okay, if you want the aid to go there, 90% should go elsewhere and we'll let 10% go there."

• (1200)

Ms. Pam Damoff: It sounds like Canadian aid has not been predominantly going to the region historically anyway. Is that right?

Dr. Tahir Shaaran: I don't know the extent, but this is something we need to investigate.

The Afghan community in Sweden had a similar problem in 2018. Our community in Sweden sent an inquiry to the Parliament of Canada, saying that the money the Swedish and Canadian communities contributed wasn't going to the Hazara community. There was a 400- or 300-page investigation to see where the aid over the last 18 years went in Afghanistan, and how much the Hazara community actually benefited from that.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you very much.

Dr. Tahir Shaaran: You're welcome.

The Chair: To the committee, due to the time restriction, we could go for only another 15 minutes maximum. Would you prefer five minutes each?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'd like just two minutes each.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, you have the floor for two minutes.

[English]

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Mr. Chair. In future, let's aim for equal time, but I know that we're more collegial at this committee than at other places.

I think we do want to get to committee business, so I'll be quick. I want to ask about opposition engagement.

I believe we need to do more, as western countries, to engage with opposition groups that are opposing the Taliban in various ways and preparing for a post-Taliban future for Afghanistan. How are opposition groups doing in terms of the inclusion of Hazaras in them? Are there effective efforts within opposition groups to build pluralistic alternatives to the Taliban, or is that more limited or more challenged?

Dr. Tahir Shaaran: Is that for me?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: That's for whoever wants to answer it.

Dr. Tahir Shaaran: Mr. Ibrahimi, do you want to answer, or should I?

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahimi: I think I can quickly comment on this.

With regard to opposition groups, as we know, they have been facing significant challenges in terms of reorganizing over the past two years. However, I think recently there have been some important statements coming from members of the opposition groups to the Taliban, including Ahmad Massoud, the leader of the National Resistance Front in Afghanistan. I think he made quite a strong statement in Paris, when he was recently visiting that city, when he specifically called on the international community to recognize two things in Afghanistan. One was gender apartheid and the second was Hazaras genocide.

That also brings me to another point that I would like to quickly make. Afghanistan under the Taliban is presenting multiple challenges in humanitarian and political security. With all of this, I really appreciate the fact that this committee is looking at the situation of Hazaras in particular, because—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you. That is my two minutes.

Other witnesses can follow up in writing, if they want, on the question of opposition groups. Again, I do think engaging opposition groups is something very important that western countries need to do more of. We want to encourage and support them in their efforts towards inclusiveness as well.

Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for two minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Ibrahim, you seemed to want to respond to my colleague Ms. Vandebeld's comments.

If we recognize genocide, what does that mean for the future or for other peoples? Acknowledging what happened could prevent such a situation from happening again.

Do you have any comments on that?

[English]

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahim: Was that question for me?

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, the question is for you, Mr. Ibrahim.

[English]

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahim: Thank you.

I think that was the point I was trying to make. While I think there were multiple challenges resulting from Afghanistan being under Taliban rule, the urgency and the significant nature of the genocide currently confronting the Hazaras in Afghanistan is deserving of particular attention. Because of that, I'm really appreciating that this committee has launched this study into the situation of the Hazaras in Afghanistan. I think there are multiple other challenges that are all being dealt with in different forums in different ways.

I think the situation of the Hazaras in Afghanistan deserves attention. One, it brings healing and attention and recognition to the

Hazaras, but most importantly, in my view, it also brings future mass atrocity prevention. I think recognition can be a first step in raising international awareness. Recognition can also be the first step towards a series of other measures that would be undertaken by Canada and other international players to prevent a future recurrence of these atrocities towards the Hazaras.

• (1205)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Ibrahim.

I would also like to thank all of the witnesses, or nearly all of them.

[English]

The Chair: Madam McPherson, you have the floor for two minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much.

Mr. Ibrahim, I just want to say that you are an excellent spokesperson for the Hazaras.

One of the things we are concerned about is that obviously the Hazaras in Afghanistan are at great risk, but I would also like to talk about the things Canada can do to help folks if they are trying to flee violence. We know that it has been very difficult for people to come to Canada. It's a challenge to go through Pakistan. There are many challenges. What would you like to see the Canadian government do in terms of helping the Hazaras who are most at risk within Afghanistan flee that violence right now?

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahim: Well, the Hazaras are facing the highest level of risk, but they are also the group that has the least representation among the number of people who were evacuated and given safe asylum from Afghanistan over the past two years.

One thing is the recognition of those threats in the refugee application processing and the location of those numbers among different groups from Afghanistan. I think that would be a great thing, especially for the at-risk Hazara women who were members of the security forces.

I think you have already discussed the issue of intersectionality of gender, ethnicity and the progressive views that were quite widely practised by Hazaras, but especially women. I think there's a very large number of them in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. I think Canada can really step in and help this very large number of people who are currently facing significant risks to their safety and well-being in Afghanistan, especially in light of the recent crackdown on refugees by the Iranian and Pakistani governments.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

Now we come to an end for the second round.

On behalf of all members of the committee and the staff here, we would like to thank our witnesses for their presence and for their testimony on the study for the report on Hazaras in Afghanistan. If you think of other information that may be useful to the committee, please either contact the clerk or send it in writing.

Thank you for your presence.

We will now suspend briefly to allow our witnesses to leave. We will then resume in camera.

Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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