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An Afghan Church Grows in Delhi

By **Neyaz Farooquee** July 22, 2013 7:13 am

In a South Delhi neighborhood, the sound of a man reciting Dari, a Farsi dialect spoken in Afghanistan, over a loudspeaker attached to a modest two-story building rose over the din of vegetable hawkers. The building was a church run by Afghan refugees who had converted to Christianity. The man was a young Afghan priest reading the Bible before a Sunday service in its basement.

Between 200 and 250 Afghan converts from Islam to Christianity who feared persecution from the Afghan authorities and the Taliban have found refuge in Delhi.

“The number of converts to Christianity increased as the U.S. presence increased after the fall of the Taliban,” said Obaid Jan, 33, the pastor, who led the Bible service. “Most of the Christian converts lived in urban areas, so the threat from the Taliban was minimal,” he added.

But the Christian converts started fleeing Afghanistan around 2005, fearing their identities might become public. Most came to India after video footage of their secret churches found its way to Noorin TV, a Kabul-based television network, in May 2009. Their lives were further endangered in 2010, when an influential member of the lower house of the Afghan parliament, Abdul Sattar Khawasi, called for the converts’ execution.

“The Afghans who appeared in this video should be publicly executed,” said Mr. Khawasi. “The House should

order the attorney general and the N.D.S.” – the National Directorate of Security – “to arrest these Afghans and execute them.”

The video showed the faces and the locations of Christian converts. “It put everyone in danger including the rest of our families who were Muslims,” said Pastor Jan, who used to work for a non-governmental organization in Kabul.

What started him on his road to Christianity, he said, was distress over infighting between different Muslim factions in Afghanistan.

“Everybody in Afghanistan claimed to be a true Muslim and kept fighting,” he said. “I couldn’t find a single Muslim in them.”

Then he met some Christian missionaries working in Afghanistan. “The fact that God has given his son to his followers in Christianity is what attracted me towards the religion,” he added.

Pastor Jan left his parents in 2007 after he received a number of threats to his life from Muslim Afghans. His family did not approve of his new religion. “The families of many converts became very hostile when they learned about their conversions,” he added.

When the family of Adib Ahmad, 24, who worked for an N.G.O. in Mazar-i-Sharif, found out about his new faith, he was given two options: return to Islam or leave the house.

“I left Mazar and went to Kabul and waited there for 20 days hoping my family might call me back,” said Mr. Ahmad. “They didn’t.”

Afghanistan recognizes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes the freedom to choose one’s religion. The war-torn country has also signed and ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,

but it adheres to a conservative interpretation of Islamic law.

Over the years, religious minorities facing persecution in Afghanistan have fled Afghanistan for different parts of the world. Abdul Rahman, a Christian convert for 16 years, was charged with apostasy in 2006 for abandoning Islam. Later, under pressure from Western governments, he was released from prison by the Afghan judiciary after it was successfully argued that he was mentally ill. Italy granted him asylum soon after.

The year 2009 saw the highest number of Christians flee Afghanistan. “Around 100 Christians fled to India in 2009,” said Pastor Jan. Some 40 Afghan Christians have come to India so far in 2013.

Most Afghan Christian converts have chosen India because of its proximity and their familiarity with the country.

An evangelical church, the Delhi Bible Fellowship, supported the Afghan Christian community and gave them a building for their church. But, Pastor Jan said, the Fellowship authorities felt unsafe because of their presence. The Afghan converts moved out and established their own church — known as the Afghan Church of New Delhi.

Thousands of Muslim and Sikh Afghan refugees have settled in India since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has recognized most of them as refugees. But the Indian government is not obligated to grant these Afghans refugee status, because the country is not a signatory to U.N. refugee convention.

The Afghans’ murky legal status complicates their lives in India. “Getting even a SIM card issued or renting a room becomes a nightmare, since we don’t any have proof of residence from the Indian Government,” said Pastor Jan.

India has a longstanding tradition of granting Tibetans and Sri Lankans refugee status, but migrants from countries that do not border on India must apply through the United Nations refugee agency. If their applications are

rejected, they can be deported from India.

The Delhi office for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees does not discuss the status of the applications submitted by Afghan Christians.

“We do not discuss individual cases because of confidentiality rules. We conduct our refugee status determination procedures in line with U.N.H.C.R.’s global standards and guidelines,” said a U.N.H.C.R official, in an e-mail response.

The converts share a social world with an earlier wave of Afghan refugees living in Delhi, yet they face hostility from Afghan Muslim refugees, who consider the converts apostates. In June, Pastor Jan was looking for an apartment in the Lajpat Nagar area in South Delhi, when four Afghan men blocked his car.

“I don’t know how they recognized me, but they didn’t move and started hurling abuses,” recalled Pastor Jan. “One of them broke a rear view mirror before I could flee.”

Officials from the U.N.H.C.R. and the Delhi police advised him to maintain a low profile.

The refugees struggle to find jobs in Delhi. Their appearance and accents give them away as Afghans.

“We are denied jobs as we don’t have proper proof of residence,” said Pastor Jan. “Our poor Hindi and English are another barrier.”

The converts have to turn to the world they fled to make a living. Around 20,000 Afghans visit India for medical treatment every year, mostly in Delhi. They need translators to help them negotiate the city’s private hospitals. Yet the converts are circumspect about their new religious affiliation to their clients from the old country.

“We hide it even from our fellow translators, as they might disclose it to others,” said Mr. Ahmad.

“It earns us merely 250 to 500 rupees (\$5 to 10) per week, an amount hardly enough for sustenance in Delhi,” said Sayed Inam, 33, a former interpreter for the U.S. Army, who left Afghanistan in February.

The children of Afghan Christian refugees attend schools run by the government or the Y.M.C.A. While the younger ones face few problems because they are starting their education in Hindi, the older ones struggle to study in a foreign language.

Despite the hostility and aggression he has faced, Pastor Jan feels his community is relatively safer in India. “The size of my community in India is only increasing,” he said. “I hope my community won’t have to migrate again.”

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