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AFGHANISTAN - INFORMATION SHEET

BACKGROUND

People from Afghanistan are referred to as Afghans, although this term is really to identify the Pashtuns, the majority ethnic group. Afghanistan is bordered by Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China. In 1978 there was a communist coup that lasted until 1992, however, a guerilla war erupted between the Red Army and the Mujahedin (Afghan resistance fighters). During this period there was a massive exodus of refugees; considered to be the biggest in the world. The population in Afghanistan is estimated to exceed 23 million, although exact figures are not known. The Taliban, a Sunni Islamist and Pashtun nationalist movement, ruled most of Afghanistan from 1996 – 2001. Viewed as an oppressive reign, it was marked by fundamental abuse of rights and what came to be known as the worst conditions for women in the world. 80% of Afghans live in a rural setting.

AFGHANS IN AUSTRALIA

Afghans first arrived in Australia in the late 19th century to work as camel drivers for the early explorers. It is estimated that by 1930 there were approximately 3000 Afghans living in Australia; predominantly men. By 1980 a further 500 refugees were accepted with the numbers increasing in the early 1990s. Under the Taliban rule refugees arrived as asylum seekers and were given Temporary Protection Visas. More recently, many Afghan families have arrived under the Humanitarian program.

LANGUAGE

Persian (known as Dari) and Pashto are the official languages of Afghanistan. In both languages Arabic script is used. Most Afghans are bilingual or trilingual. Pashto (پښتو), also known as Pakhto, Pushto, Pukhto, پختو, Pashtoe, Pashtu, Pushtu or Pushtoo) is a language spoken in Afghanistan and Western Pakistan.

RELIGION

The population is exclusively Muslim with 80% being Sunni Muslim and 19% Shi'a/Shia/Shiite Muslim. The religion of Muslims is called Islam. Observers of Islam live by the five pillars of Islam.

RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

ID AL-KABIR OR ID-E QORBAN - The Great Feast of the Victim. This festival commemorates the sacrifice of Abraham at the end of the annual period of pilgrimage to Mecca.

THE ID AL-FITR OR ID-E RAMAZAN - The Small Feast or Feast of the Ramazan marks the end of the fasting month. It is a happy period when relatives and friends visit each other.

ETHNIC MAKEUP

- Pashtun 42%,
- Tajik 27% (Iranian Origin)
- Hazara 9%, (Mongol descendants)
- Uzbek 9% (speak a dialect of Turkish)
- Aimak 4%
- Turkmen 3%,
- Baloch 2% (speak Baluchi, a dialect of Turkish)
- other 4%

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

SLEEPING: Many families sleep in one room on mattresses that are unfolded for the night. No specific places are assigned to those sleeping in the room. In the morning, the room is tidied.

MARRIAGE: Marriage is considered to be an obligation and divorce is so poorly looked upon that it is extremely rare.

SOCIAL ETIQUETTE: Men shake hands with each other and will often place their hand over their heart. Men and women do not shake hands with each other and do not engage in conversation.

CLOTHING: During the reign of the Taliban men were commanded to wear a hat or a turban and to be bearded. Afghans still comply with wearing traditional dress and there is very little western dress in evidence. Women previously had to be completely covered, and though no longer strictly enforced, many women still comply with this mode of dress.

CHILD REARING PRACTICES: When babies are born they are swaddled for up to six months. Breast feeding is usually between one to two years with weaning sudden. As children grow up in a segregated home setting, they move easily between the female part of the house and the part designated public.

Afghans traditionally celebrate the birth of a child on its sixth day. On this day the baby is given a name, and guests visit with gifts. This is an important ceremony with the names determined by the elders of the family. Children are highly valued in Afghan families. Honour and respect towards parents and elders are highly regarded. Corporal punishment is deemed normal, although some leniency is given to younger children. Male offspring tend to have more freedom. The expectation of girls is to stay at home and help the mother. Circumcision of boys is carried out before physical maturity.

STATUS OF WOMEN: Since the demise of the Taliban regime, women receive better treatment, however, some attitudes about women's inferiority are entrenched. In addition, the loss of male lives in war, the continuing conflict of war and a lack of opportunities for women means that the plight of women in Afghanistan is still a problem.

CUISINE

The staple diet consists of flat bread cooked on an iron plate. It is served with a light meat stock. Water and buttermilk are the common drink. Another common meal is scrambled eggs with tomatoes and onions. The right hand is used to eat with and usually it is from a common bowl. Islamic food prohibitions are followed in Afghanistan. The laws cover the eating of animals slaughtered according to Islamic law; no consumption of alcohol, pork or wild boar. Shiite Muslims also avoid rabbit and hare consumption.

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