

Metro/Religion

Afghan Hindus Required to Wear Identity Labels

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP)—Afghan Hindus expressed dismay and sadness last week at new requirements from the Taliban leadership that they wear a yellow piece of cloth on their shirt pockets to set them apart from Muslims.

"Who knows who is close to God?" asked Gandar, a 32-year-old Hindu pharmacy owner in the Afghan capital Kabul. "We feel part of the same body, the same house, the same room, like a family... Why should we have a mark?"

The Taliban, who control 95 percent of this drought-stricken, war-torn nation of 21 million people, defended their ruling Wednesday. They insisted

it was meant to protect Hindus from religious police who patrol the streets enforcing the Taliban's version of Islamic law.

"This is not any kind of discrimination," said Mohammed Suhail Shaheen, deputy head of the Afghan Embassy in Pakistan. "They (the Hindus) can carry out their rituals as before... They will enjoy full rights."

Muslim men — required by the Taliban to keep their beards — sometimes claim they're Hindu if arrested for shaving, Shaheen said. Conversely, clean-shaven Hindus are sometimes arrested erroneously, he added.

The new order also requires Hindu

women for the first time to cover themselves head-to-toe in a garment called a burqa, just as Muslim women have been forced to do in Afghanistan.

The plan — reminiscent of a Nazi policy in the 1930s and 40s that required European Jews to wear yellow Stars of David — has been criticized internationally as a human rights violation. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan appealed to the Taliban to reject the decision, his spokesman said.

Hindus in Afghanistan have not been the target of persecution and have generally been allowed to practice their religion freely. However, over decades of war, the number of Hindus

has dwindled from a high of about 50,000 during the 1970s to 500 in the capital and small pockets elsewhere.

The new restrictions make many Hindus feel dangerously singled out.

"We don't feel safe with this," said Balbir, a Hindu spice dealer in Kabul. He said the mark could cause "security problems" for him when he travels to the countryside.

"This is discrimination. We are Afghans. I was born in Afghanistan. We gave our sons to the army to fight. We prayed for the dead together with our Muslim brothers," said Balbir, who like many Afghans goes by one name.

Moon Singh, 18-year-old Sikh

shopowner, supported the new measure. "Sometimes the religious police beat them (the Hindus) and say 'Why aren't you in the mosque praying' because they look like Muslims," he said. Afghanistan's Sikhs and Hindus are closely linked, sharing temples in the capital. Sikh men are not subject to the new ruling because their style of turbans and beards makes them easily distinguishable from Muslims.

The ruling was initially approved by Afghanistan's senior council of Islamic scholars, orulema.

The Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which runs the religious police, then spec-

ified that the label should be a yellow cloth, said Abdul Annan Himat, head of the Taliban's Bakhtar news agency.

The head of the religious police, Mohammed Wali, told the AP on Tuesday that the plan would be implemented soon. The decision outraged Hindu-dominated India. "We believe such edicts have no place in civilized society," Raminder Jassal, an Indian Foreign Ministry spokesman, said Wednesday.

U.N. spokesman Fred Eckhard said the requirement would be a "grave violation of human rights and recall some of the most deplorable acts of discrimination in history."

Allen Temple Hosts Appreciation Celebration

The Allen Temple Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, 4236 N.E. 8th Ave., will hold

an appreciation celebration for Rev. Dr. Leroy Haynes Jr. and Rev. Helen Hayes,

honoring their commitment and dedicated service to the Allen Temple family and to the met-

ropolitan community.

The festivities begin with a musical on Friday, June 1 at 7 p.m. and culminate on Sunday, June 3 at 4 p.m.

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When Pastor Haynes is not teaching, counseling and preaching the Good news of The Gospel, he is teaching at conference meetings throughout the United States, or sharing his vision of the drug abuse program he founded to restore addictive persons, codependents or families.



Rev. Dr. Leroy Haynes Jr. and his wife, Rev. Helen Haynes.

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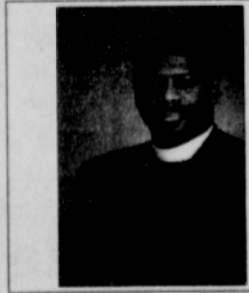
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