

# Preliminary Assessment of Alleged Mass Gravesites in the Area of Mazar-I-Sharif, Afghanistan:

January 16-21 and February 7-14

A Report by  
[Physicians for Human Rights](#)  
Boston • Washington DC

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### Background

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) is an organization of health professionals, scientists, and concerned citizens that uses knowledge and skills of the medical and forensic sciences to investigate and prevent violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.

PHR has for the past four years reported on the status of health and human rights among Afghan women. Long before the world was seized with the conduct of the Taliban regime, PHR undertook survey research of women's health and human rights, first in a 1998 report, [The Taliban's War on Women](#) and most recently in a 2001 report, [Women's Health and Human Rights in Afghanistan](#). The report can be viewed in full on the web site. The latter survey of about 750 women showed the stunning deterioration of women's health, both physical and mental health, under the Taliban regime.

In January 2002, PHR released a report on [Conditions at Shebarghan Prison, Northern Afghanistan](#). The report documents the deplorable conditions at Shebarghan prison where the PHR investigators found severe overcrowding, non-existent sanitation, exposure to winter cold, inadequate food and no medical supplies, resulting in epidemic illness and deaths. The report, which also demands an urgent expansion of the international security force, concludes that conditions at the prison are in grave violation of international standards for prisoners.

In 1997 the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights requested that PHR participate in a preliminary assessment of reports of mass graves in northern Afghanistan. In December of that year a PHR forensic scientist sent by our organization traveled to Mazar-I-Sharif with a team led by the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Afghanistan. The team visited a number of locations alleged to be sites where executed prisoners were buried.

We at PHR believe that to understand and account for serious violations of international humanitarian law that have occurred in Afghanistan over a twenty-three year period is a crucial component of the current reconstruction process.

Proper examination of bodies found in mass graves and dignified burial of remains, are essential elements of a truth and accountability process. We believe such a process is also critical for future peace and stability.

## **Introduction**

In January 2002, PHR sent a three person fact-finding delegation to Afghanistan. Preliminary information regarding gravesites was compiled by PHR board member Dr. Jennifer Leaning and consultant John Heffernan on a visit to the Northern Afghanistan area on January 16-21, 2002. The team spent five days in Mazar-I-Sharif collecting information on several alleged mass grave sites. As a follow-up to the January trip, in February PHR sent two forensic anthropologists to conduct an independent forensic assessment that took place from February 7-14, 2002.

Both teams investigated sites that are related to recently alleged atrocities as well as sites that date back four to five years. The two gravesites, which are believed to contain recently disposed human remains, (within the last few months) are located at a site near Mazar-I-Sharif and at another site near the town of Shebarghan.

It is alleged that the site near Shebarghan could have been the disposal ground of some of the Taliban fighters who had surrendered to the Northern Alliance in November and December 2001.

The visits to the other sites, which allegedly occurred in 1997-1998, were conducted at the request of local Hizb-I-Wahdet party officials. The local party leaders identified 13 purported Hazara gravesites in the Mazar-I-Sharif. A number of the sites that were visited relate to incidents dating to the conflict over the occupation of Mazar-I-Sharif by the Taliban between 1997-98. PHR recognizes that there have been reports of many other non-Hazara alleged mass gravesites in the Mazar-I-Sharif area, but due to time constraints and access, these were the only sites visited.

The first PHR visit to gravesites in the Mazar-I-Sharif vicinity took place on January 18, 2002. The mass gravesite near Shebarghan was first visited by the earlier PHR delegation on January 20th.

## **Findings**

The first seven sites listed below, which were visited in the company of the Hizb-I-Wahdet local party leadership, are reported to be Hazara gravesites that relate to incidents dating between 1997 and 1998. Sites eight and nine were independently visited by PHR investigators and allegedly contain remains from more recent conflicts.

Interviews of local witnesses were conducted for all sites visited.

### **Site #1:1**

**Gravesite visited on:** January 18 and February 9, 2002

**General Information:** The site is alleged by some witnesses to contain 2,000 victims. Others contend the number of victims is far less.

**Findings and Observations:** The grave area was probed by the PHR investigators by digging several test pits in order to determine the horizontal length of the uppermost subsurface

remains, (The dimensions of the test site measured 5m x 2.3m.). The surface of the grave had been disturbed from previous digging. Surface human skeletal elements consisted of one complete cranium, cranial fragments, right scapula, right ulna, femur, two left fibulae and an assortment of ribs and vertebrae. The crania, femur and left innominate represented male individuals and all elements represented adult individuals. The bones were disassociated and some demonstrated postmortem fractures and evidence of scavenging. In addition to human skeletal remains, clothing, an illegible ID card, and a fragment of a 1,000.00 Afghani bill were observed.

Prior to departure, all test pits were filled.

**Summary of Witness Statements:** One eyewitness stated to PHR that this site contains the remains of over 2,000 victims from the conflict to capture the city of Mazar-I-Sharif in 1998.

Another independent account of an eyewitness reported to PHR states that bodies were brought to the gravesite by the Taliban after the fall of Mazar-I-Sharif over a period of two days. It is estimated by the eyewitness that the site contains as many 500 victims.

Another account states that bodies were brought to the gravesite in Russian Kamaz flatbed trucks. According to this report, some people were killed at the site and some bodies were brought to the site already dead. It was also reported that some of the dead bodies had their hands tied behind their backs.



View towards the west



View towards the northeast

## **Site #2:**

**Visited on:** January 18 and February 9, 2002 (two separate visits on that day)

**General Information:** On the February 9 visit, the site was independently visited in the afternoon and several interviews were conducted.

**Findings and Observations:** The graves were located approximately 4m apart. Grave #1 located north of the adobe wall, is alleged to contain the remains of seven men, who were found dead with their hands tied behind their backs. Clothing and the partial skeletal remains of a single individual were visible from an area that had been previously disturbed by digging activity of locals. Grave #2 located south of the adobe wall, is alleged to contain the remains of 10 male victims. A single military-type boot and pants leg protruded from the ground. These were attached to subsurface remains. The grave had recently been disturbed during the course of agricultural activity.

**Summary of Witness Statements:** According to independent interviews conducted by PHR in the afternoon, the remains in these graves allegedly are those of "Bamiyan Fighters" who had been caught and killed by the Taliban. Apparently, unfamiliar with the area around Mazar-I-Sharif, they became lost when fleeing from Mazar-I-Sharif when the Taliban took the city (1997/1998) and were killed in the village of Yaka Tut. The deaths allegedly took place over a three-day period during Ramadan, three days after the Taliban captured Mazar-I-Sharif. The witness told PHR that the bodies were left in the open for approximately two weeks, before local residents felt secure enough to bury them in these graves.

Approximately 20 villagers were also alleged to have been killed during this period. Their families buried them. The PHR scientific delegation received several accounts by villagers of disappearances. Among these were a twelve year old boy and three adult males who never returned from Mazar-I-Sharif. The village elder was jailed by the Taliban for 18 days and then released.



Grave #2 - Visible remains.



Grave #1 - Visible remains.

### **Site #3:**

**Visited on:** January 18 and February 9, 2002

**General Information:** This site consists of 'L'-shaped trench of varying shallow depth. The remains were found at one end of the trench.

**Findings and Observations:** Commingled human and animal skeletal remains, as well as clothing were observed. The general appearance of this site was more of a deposit, rather than an exposed burial.

**Summary of Witness Statements:** According to one informant, over 50 people were killed at this site. The surviving family members are reported to have fled. There are no eyewitnesses to this event.



Trench.





Remains visible in trench.

#### **Site #4:**

**Visited:** February 12, 2002

**General Information:** Four unmarked gravesites were stated to be in the area, two of which were pointed out to PHR by villagers. Each of these graves were said to contain one person.

**Summary of Witness Statements:** According to the villagers this is an exclusively Tajik village. The victims in the four graves are alleged to be Taliban who died in combat with General Dostum's Uzbek soldiers three years ago and then were buried by the villagers because dogs were scavenging the bodies. The Taliban soldiers allegedly killed seventeen villagers in the first days of their attack on Mazar-I-Sharif. They reportedly died in crossfire between Taliban and Uzbek/Hazara fighters.

#### **Site #5:**

**Visited on:** February 12, 2002

**General Information:** Reportedly this site contains over 400 victims. The gravesite consists of several graves in a cemetery, each allegedly containing several bodies.

**Summary of Witness Statements:** According to witness statements collected by PHR, the majority of the population of this part of Mazar-I-Sharif belongs to the Hazara ethnic group. When the Taliban occupied Mazar-I-Sharif, looting, killing and kidnappings reportedly took place in this part of town over a period of four to five days. According to one witness, about 50 civilians were killed and about 20 to 25 were kidnapped and subsequently 'disappeared'. The victims were all Hazara and followers of the Shia religion. Reportedly, none of them were fighters. The bodies were left out in the street out of fear of reprisal over the period of several days, after which permission was requested and granted by the governor of Balkh province to bury them. The cemetery gravedigger estimates that there are between 80 and 100 victims, men and women, but no children. He told PHR that he buried bodies in several graves at the cemetery.



Cemetery.

### **Site #6:**

**Visited on:** January 18 and February 13, 2002

**General Information:** According to witnesses interviewed by PHR, 78 victims are reportedly buried here. The graves were located in two areas of the village. Grave #1 is situated alongside the road at the entrance to the village and consists of several separate traditional adobe grave mounds. Grave #2 consists of several separate traditional adobe mounds in the village cemetery. The village is largely destroyed.

**Summary of Witness Statements:** According to the witnesses interviewed by PHR, 2 women and 68 men were killed by the Taliban in house to house searches in 1997. The village was abandoned and most inhabitants escaped to Mazar-I-Sharif. After three days they returned and re-captured the village, reportedly killing 20 Taliban fighters. The village was held for a year after this incident, until the Taliban re-captured the village in 1998. Grave #1 contains the remains of 49 men and 1 woman. Grave #2 contains the remains of 19 men and 1 women.

The majority of the village population were allied with the Wahdat. Some were allied with a Shia faction of Harakat. This village is located in view of the Mazar-I-Sharif airport (approx. at 1km distance). One informant told PHR that, in the past, the village provided 30 fighters dedicated to guarding the airport along with other Jumbish and Jamiat troops.



Cemetery - view towards airport.

## **Site #7:**

**Visited on:** February 13, 2002

**General Information:** No estimate of the number of victims at this site was forthcoming.

**Summary of Witness Statements:** According to a witness interviewed by PHR, when the Taliban came to the village for the first time, they killed approximately 15 villagers, mutilating some of the bodies. Some villagers were also arrested and taken away, never to be seen again. Since Pashtuns occupied the village after this incident, the families were not allowed to bury the remains at the local cemetery. They took the remains to a village where they were buried. This is a Hazara village, where most are allied to the Wahdat, and some to the Harakat factions.

When the Taliban took the village, they invited approximately 200 Pashtun refugee families from Iran, who had fled there from the Helmand region, to settle in the houses abandoned by the Hazara. This was stated as a reason why their village had not been destroyed. Currently no Pashtuns are in the village and 160 Hazara families have returned.

## **Site #8:**

**Visited on:** January 20 and February 10, 2002 (near Shebarghan)

**General Information:** The site is situated on the western side of the dirt road and consists of a large area with evidence of heavy machinery movement, including track and blade marks. It is alleged, and there is speculation from well-informed international observers, that this site could have been the disposal ground of some of the Taliban fighters who surrendered to the Northern Alliance in November and December of 2001.

PHR investigators on both visits were told, by a number of sources, that there continues to be no reliable accounting for the numbers of prisoners resulting from the fall of Kunduz and Mazar-I-Sharif. These sources include members of international organizations, Afghan officials, community members and journalists.

**Findings and Observations:** The site can be divided into three separate areas:

1. Area I is a flattened rectangle of ground marked by several parallel paths, consistent with tracks that are left behind by a vehicle with a blade. This graded and flattened out area forms a rectangle measuring 60m in a west to east direction and 16.5m in north to south direction. Its northern side is located approximately 30m north of Area II and its southern side is located about 27m south of Area III.
2. Area II, is a disturbed area adjacent to Area I. This surface is churned up and scarred by the marks of vehicles or large machinery, such as might be left behind when vehicles of this type turn and move around.

An array of disassociated skeletal elements were strewn on the surfaces of Areas I and II. Some bones were absent flesh, bleached, and degreased with no residual soft tissue. Others were less weathered, retained odor, grease and vestigial soft tissue. Three pelvic elements were observed, all were males. Ages ranged from late teens ranging to middle age. The majority of bones had been scavenged. Shoes, prayer caps and prayer beads, and other wearing apparel were found.

All clothing was in relatively good condition, exhibiting minimal weathering or fading.



3. Area III is a slight mound that contained a concentration of disassociated human skeletal remains and scattered clothing items. A large fragment of a leg prosthesis was observed. Other human skeletal material was dispersed throughout the general area and across the road. Dog tracks were prominent throughout the site and animals had gnawed many of the bones.

**Witnesses Interviewed:** Witnesses were interviewed by PHR.

**Summary of Witness Statements:** One witness, who drove by the site early in the morning, reported to PHR that he passed the site sometime between late December 2001 and early January 2002, and observed six container trucks backed into the site with their backdoors open and cabs facing the paved road. Another witness saw three trucks in a T-formation. Both witnesses observed men covering their faces (as if avoiding bad odors) and armed guards who prompted them to take a different path to the main road.

According to another witness, many bodies of soldiers who died in the container transports were taken to an area, near the perimeter of the gravesite.

Another witness reported that on about January 5, 2002, he drove by the site and observed and photographed two mounds that allegedly contained the bodies of Taliban soldiers. These mounds were "flattened" out by the time he drove by there a second time with the PHR team on January 20, 2002.

While at the site on February 10 the PHR forensic team interviewed two witnesses. They stated that the grave in this location dated from four years ago and that it contained the victims who had been killed by Commander Malik's troops.

Local witnesses reported that shortly after the end of Ramadan (end of November/beginning of December 2001) bulldozers were seen at work in the area, which was closely guarded by soldiers. He stated that he believed that the bulldozers were there because dead bodies had been brought there during the night, when villagers were not allowed out. Soldiers guarding the area did not allow locals to observe what was going on.

The second witness stated to PHR that he believed the dead were brought there on one day. He said that he remembered seeing one container truck and two bulldozers. He believes that this happened towards the end of Ramadan 2001.



View towards the east, overlooking Area I. Area II is located to the north (left side of the photo). Area III is located south (right of the photo).



View towards the east, overlooking Area III.



View towards the west, overlooking Area II.



Area II: Scattered Human Skeletal Remains.



Human Tibia.



Clothing remains:  
skull cap.



Rubber glove.

**Site #9:**

**Visited on:** February 13, 2002 (near Mazar-I-Sharif)

**General Information:** The expansive area is littered with both exploded, and unexploded ordinances consisting of large artillery-type projectiles and empty cartridge casings. PHR was led to this site by two witnesses. The site was identified as the place where they had taken their dead after the Taliban captured their village.

**Observations and Findings:** There are a cluster of several approximately 30 to 50m long and 3m deep excavated trenches. In one of these trenches, the PHR scientists observed scattered skeletal remains of several individuals. Other bodies protrude from shallow burials within the trench. At the end of this trench remnants of several plaster leg casts were observed.

The surrounding surface area is littered with partially decomposed and scavenged human remains, extracted by vultures and dogs from a shallow grave. In total, there were a minimum of 30 remains scattered about this area, and several more protruding from the burial area outside of the trench. There are also many clothing items scattered about the surface.

Preliminary observations were that all individuals, with the exception of one were adult males. The exception was a young male in his mid to late teens.

**Summary of Witness Statements:** According to witnesses interviewed by PHR, villagers were killed by the Taliban after the capture of Mazar-I-Sharif. Bodies were deposited/buried in the trench that now holds the remains of more recent and decomposing human remains. The latter remains were deposited there after the fall of Mazar-I-Sharif to the Northern Alliance in November 2001 and are alleged to belong to "Pakistani Taliban."



Trench containing unexploded ordinance and human remains.



Trench containing unexploded ordinance and human remains.





Human remains.



Human remains.

## Conclusion

On the basis of the two investigations, PHR concludes:

1. All the sites visited by PHR teams contained human remains consistent with their designation as possible gravesites, which warrant further investigation.
2. There is evidence of recent disposal of human remains at two sites. One site is near the city of Shebarghan and the other is near the city of Mazar-I-Sharif. The site outside of Shebarghan is a short distance from the city's prison.
3. Several sources reported that the bodies at the Shebarghan site include Taliban prisoners from the recent coalition war in the north, who were transported to these sites in truck containers. These reports cannot be confirmed or refuted without forensic examination of the bodies.
4. There is no reliable accounting for the numbers of prisoners resulting from the recent falls of Mazar-I-Sharif or Kunduz. As reported to PHR from several sources, the Taliban prisoners currently in Shebarghan prison originated from several different incidents and locations. According to one eyewitness, some of the prisoners were transported to the prison in containers after the fall of Mazar-I-Sharif to the Northern Alliance.
5. The mass gravesites shown to the PHR teams by the Hazara local leadership appear to contain both combatants and non-combatants from several different stages of the various campaigns in the conflict in the north over the last five years.
6. The number of victims in these graves can not be determined without exhumation.

## Recommendations

On the basis of direct observations, interviews with local eyewitnesses on site and extensive discussions with local and international representatives conducted by PHR's initial delegation in January 2002 and the forensic assessment in February 2002, PHR recommends the following:

1. All alleged mass gravesites should be protected by the Interim Administration of Afghanistan and the international community to prevent further disturbance until thoroughly investigated. Particularly, the site near Shebarghan, which reportedly contains the remains of Taliban prisoners from the recent conflict.
2. The exposed remains currently being scavenged at a number of the gravesites should be buried, so as to preserve the remains for future investigation, particularly site number nine where there has been significant scavenging of surface remains.
3. Responsible authorities should urgently account for the numbers of Taliban prisoners allegedly taken from Kunduz.
4. Responsible authorities should conduct an overall independent accounting of prisoners and prisoner movement throughout Afghanistan is needed.
5. The people of Afghanistan have been victim to atrocities for many years. It is important that alleged past, present and ongoing human rights violations and war crimes be investigated regardless of ethnicity or political affiliation of the perpetrator or victim. An impartial accounting of these atrocities, as suggested in the proposed truth commission, should be vigorously pursued by the Afghan government with assistance from the international community.

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Notes:

1. For security reasons all names and locations have been removed from this report.

**Physicians for Human Rights** (PHR) promotes health by protecting human rights. Since 1986, PHR members have worked to stop torture, disappearances, and political killings by governments and opposition groups; to improve health and sanitary conditions in prisons and detention centers; to investigate the physical and psychological consequences of violations of humanitarian law in internal and international conflicts; to defend medical neutrality and the right of civilians and combatants to receive medical care during times of war; to protect health professionals who are victims of violations of human rights; and to prevent medical complicity in torture and other abuses.

The International Forensic Program (IFP) of Physicians for Human Rights is directed by Dr. Haglund, a forensic anthropologist with extensive experience in death investigations and in the exhumation and examination of mass graves. He has testified before the International Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

PHR shared the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize for its role as a founding member of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. For more information, visit [www.phrusa.org](http://www.phrusa.org)

Leonard S. Rubenstein is Executive Director. Susannah Sirkin is Deputy Director.

National Office:  
Physicians for Human Rights  
100 Boylston Street, Suite 702



Boston, MA 02116  
Tel. 617 695-0041  
Fax. 617 695-0307  
Email: [phrusa@phrusa.org](mailto:phrusa@phrusa.org)  
Web: [www.phrusa.org](http://www.phrusa.org)

Washington Office:  
Physicians for Human Rights  
1156 15th Street, NW  
Suite 1001  
Washington, DC 20005  
Tel: (202) 728-5335  
Fax: (202) 728-3053  
Email: [phrusa@phrusa.org](mailto:phrusa@phrusa.org)  
Web: [www.phrusa.org](http://www.phrusa.org)

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