



It's hell for Afghans we rejected

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IN THE depths of the harsh Afghan winter early this year, Abdul Azmin Rajabi took an Australian with him on a pilgrimage to the graves of his two daughters.

Mr Rajabi placed his hands on the snow-covered tombstones marking where his children now lie, and told Phil Glendenning, the director of the Edmund Rice Centre: "I put my life in danger to help my family, to help my children, but I couldn't."

Mr Rajabi is one of 400 Afghans Australia rejected under the Howard government's "Pacific Solution". His story, along with many others, is told in a documentary, *A Well-Founded Fear*, to be screened on SBS next month.

He had reason to fear the Taliban in 2001. His family had connections to the previous communist government, and as if this wasn't reason enough for the Taliban to want him dead, he had given up his Islamic faith and had married outside his tribal group.

The Taliban came looking for him and captured his father, who refused to say where his son was. So he was beaten with electrical cords. "When he came home he was unable to walk or talk or sit," the son says in the documentary.. "His entire body was blackened with bruises."

He died two days later. So Mr Rajabi fled to Australia, leaving behind his wife and children, in hiding in Iran, waiting until they could join him.

How his two young daughters came to be killed by the Taliban a year later is a tragic consequence of Australia's refusal to grant this Afghan father asylum when he came begging for refuge, say the makers of the documentary.

The decision to embark on such a perilous journey to Australia, aided by people smugglers, was a hard one. "I consoled myself hoping that, although separated from my family, at least I would find a way to keep myself and my family alive," Mr Rajabi says.

Mr Rajabi, a member of the persecuted Hazara ethnic group in Afghanistan, arrived on Nauru in late 2001, where his claim for asylum was rejected and he was given no right of appeal.

He tells Mr Glendenning, whose search for rejected asylum seekers is at the heart of the program, that Immigration officials told him it was safe to go back. They offered to give him \$2000 to return "voluntarily", or face indefinite detention. "They told us that even if we stayed there for 10 years we would never be accepted."

So in late 2002 Mr Rajabi went back. Four months later he was at home with his family in a town outside Kabul when an explosion ripped through the walls and windows of his house. He describes in the documentary how first there was one bang, then another. Shrapnel tore through the window, killing his daughter Yalda. Rowana, his youngest daughter, died a few minutes later.

It was a grenade attack, believed to be by the Taliban who, according to local medical authorities and newspaper reports, targeted the family.

Mr Rajabi drops his head into his hands and breaks down, unable to go on.

Today he lives with the remainder of his family in Pakistan, where he can't send his sons to school for fear of their safety.

He only came to Kabul so he could tell Mr Glendenning, and Australia, in person, what happened to him. "We could only speak from our heart, which we did," he says of the account he gave to Australian officials seven years ago, but which they didn't want to believe.

Mohammed Rizae is also a Hazara Afghan who was rejected by Australia. He believes this had something to do with the translators used by Immigration officials on Nauru who were all Pashtuns - the same ethnic group as the Taliban.

He was too scared to tell the translators some aspects of his story, such as the fact he is Ishmaili, a member of the pacifist Islamic sect targeted by the Taliban and the nomadic Kuchis, who are also Pashtuns.

Mr Rizae's grandfather had refused to fight the Soviet-backed communists. He was publicly hanged by the Taliban in a bazaar.

But Australian officials told Mr Rizae there were inconsistencies in his testimony, and they were unable to substantiate his fear of persecution because Afghanistan was now safe.

So in 2002 Australia sent him back to Afghanistan, where he was forced to flee to Pakistan because his old enemies returned to pursue him again. Today his province is in the hands of the Taliban.

"Those places where we live are not and never were secure," he tells Mr Glendenning.

Mr Rizae now spends his days moving between Pakistan and Kabul.

There are many other stories.

Gholam Payador, also an Hazara Afghan sent back to Afghanistan by Australia in 2002, holds up a photo of himself and two other Afghans standing together on Nauru. The other men are now dead, he says. One was shot by two men on a motorcycle.

Mohammed Hussain, another Afghan rejected by Australia, also meets with Mr Glendenning. "I was forced to leave this country, and seeking refuge in Australia worsened my crime," he tells him.

A self-described poet who was working in a coalmine, he disappeared soon after he met the filmmakers. Eyewitnesses saw him taken out from his workplace by gunmen who put him into a 4WD vehicle with blackened windows. Mr Glendenning said he is still missing and there are grave fears for his life.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/10/26/1224955854962.html>