



GANDHARA

## Afghans Hail Effort To Protect Rare Raptors From Smugglers

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An Afghan man with a falcon at a refugee camp near Radja Bahoudine.

Afghan authorities are welcoming a foreign-based NGO's actions to help curb a runaway trade in smuggled exotic birds from Afghanistan.

The group, Nada Al-Sheba Lel-Hayat Al-Bariya from United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.), invited journalists to an event to mark the freeing on March 17 of 30 such birds near the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif.

The animals had been seized from smugglers in the Middle East, where reports on such trafficking from South Asia suggest **there is high demand** for birds of prey and other exotic animals among the very wealthy.

Last year alone, some 5,000 wild birds were smuggled out of Afghanistan, according to the head of the country's Environmental Protection Agency, Mustafa Zahir. Falcons, hawks, and geese are said to be among the smugglers' favorites.

The most highly prized falcons can reportedly sell for as much as \$100,000.

Afghan authorities are constrained by budget limitations and other obstacles to enforcement after decades of war and hardship, with infrastructure, security, and rebuilding projects generally regarded as more urgent priorities.

So Zahir was in Mazar-e Sharif on March 17 to lend government support to a newly launched wildlife protection center.

"Unfortunately, the smuggling of birds that is continuing from Afghanistan must stop," Zahir says. "In Mazar-e Sharif, in Herat, and Bamian the hunters are hunting the falcons and hawks. Most of these birds are smuggled to Gulf nations."

Zahir adds that such rare birds will vanish unless "stark steps" are taken.

So the U.A.E.'s opening of a wildlife research farm in northern Afghanistan is seen as a good omen.

Nada Al-Sheba Lel-Hayat Al-Bariya has pledged to invest some \$1 million in the Afghan effort.

"God willing, our main goal is to protect wildlife in Afghanistan, and we are trying to attract the attention of other organizations, mainly in the Gulf nations," says Sayeed Abdul Samad Munib, the U.A.E. group's local head.

Munib says the NGO plans to launch a bird-breeding program in the near future for release into the wild.

The choice of locations for his group's operations -- about 50 kilometers from Mazar-e Sharif -- was important because the sandy deserts outside the Balkh Province capital provide an ideal habitat for such wild birds to nest and brood.

The EPA's Zahir says mature female hawks lay about four eggs a year and the NGO is determined to protect those eggs in order to boost Afghan bird populations.

Decades of near-constant conflict in Afghanistan has held dire consequences for its

wildlife. The plight of millions of internally displaced persons, drought, and deforestation have contributed to the endangerment of Afghanistan's wildlife.

Zahir suggests the U.A.E. NGO will expand its operations southward, to Nimroz and Helmand provinces, by setting up similar wildlife protection centers there.

-- Mustafa Sarwar in Prague and Latif Sahak in Mazar-e Sharif

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