

Interview with Mr Hussain

Interviewer: Fatima Framarz

Question: Hello Mr. Hussain! Welcome, thank you for coming. We are very happy to have you.

Answer: You are welcome. I'm very happy to speak with you as well. I hope what I say will be useful.

Question: Let us begin by asking which year and where in Afghanistan you were born?

Answer: If we go by the Canadian calendar, my birth year would be 1962. But the exact original year, only God knows. I was born in Kabul. So according to Canada, my birth year is 1962, in April.

Question: Very briefly, can you tell us about your family history? Where were your grandparents born?

Answer: My paternal grandparents were from Behsud, from the second part of Behsud, Shenia. My paternal ancestors were from a large clan. There were about seven brothers, and we are now probably the fifth or sixth generation, maybe even the sixth generation. It is a lot; I have forgotten some of it. In Shenia, Behsud, I really wish Behsud would be a province, because in terms of population and the size of the area it is larger than many provinces. But my own birthplace is Kabul; my father and paternal grandparents were from Behsud, and from my mother's side we are from Bamiyan, from the Shibar district.

Question: Is there any family story or tradition that has been passed down to you from previous generations?

Answer: From a Hazara perspective, whether we speak of social traditions or social life, they have definitely been passed down. The same is true from a religious point of view. There is no doubt that those who are born in Afghanistan, or in what we used to call ancient Khorasan, inherit these traditions. From the grandparents all the way down to the children and grandchildren, everything is passed on. We have all of it. The general public has it too. We also

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hope that this continues, because no nationality can remain alive without history, whether religious, political, or social. Every people has its own customs and traditions. Hazaras too have very special traditions, and they are truly something to be proud of.

Question: What did your grandparents, and then your parents, do for a living? How did they support themselves?

Answer: My grandparents were from Behsud. The first person in our family to come to Kabul was my father. My father came and did all kinds of hard labor. That is clear. No one can say Hazaras were fed from the start without effort. Thank God, we did not beg. Politically, we had very little participation, which is unfortunate. If we entered politics, that would be normal too, because every ethnic group in a country has the right to participate in politics. But my father gradually moved into business. We are grateful; we had everything. When my father came from Behsud to Kabul, he worked with some people at first. Then he began doing hard labor and later moved into business and opened a shop. By the end, when I left Afghanistan, the shop was like a supermarket. But it took a very long time to build. He had a shop in Mandawi (Kabul's wholesale market), then a leather shop in Saraji, and shops in Khair Khana, Karteh Parwan, and near the Baharistan cinema area. When I left in 1980, there was a market in Taimani that my father himself had started, and our whole family supported ourselves through that.

Question: Did your parents ever tell you how they met and how they got married?

Answer: Now that our people can speak freely about everything, the older generation did not really tell romantic stories. They told some things, but since the fathers and mothers of most Hazaras were busy with hard labor so their children could have something, they focused on that. Thank God, most of our parents tried very hard to make their children educated. There was not much talk of romance or that sort of thing in many families, and I do not remember hearing much of it.

Question: If you are comfortable, can you share your own marriage story?

Answer: My marriage story is interesting, very interesting. It follows the custom of proposing, what people here would call an arranged marriage, but in Hazara society the proposal process has

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always been a very respectful practice. Several proposals came my way, but perhaps it was not meant to be, or there was some other problem, or perhaps the woman I am with now was my fate. My final proposal was this wife of mine, who lives in Europe and is from a close branch of my mother's family. My brother called from Canada and the family accepted, and the wedding was held. I saw my wife in Europe for the first time. Neither she had seen me nor I had seen her.

Question: Was it chosen by your older brother?

Answer: It was chosen by the family. Since we were very close relatives on my mother's side, they accepted it and the wedding happened. We have now been together for 31 years.

Question: While you were in Afghanistan, you must have been occupied with something. What do you remember most? Overall, what do you remember about life in Afghanistan?

Answer: I remember almost everything. I helped my father a lot in the shop, and I also studied. I studied at the school I did not even particularly like, the one called Abdul Rahman Khan School. After that I studied at the secondary technical school, which here would be called the Afghanistan Institute of Technology. I also studied English at Kabul Center and played football. My main interest was sports and football. I played football on the Maywand team, because Maywand was our community team.

Question: What was the main rhythm of daily life? When you woke up in the morning, did you go to school first, or first help your father in the shop and then go to school in the afternoon?

Answer: From grade three onward, as I remember, I helped my father in the mornings because school started after the cannon shot at noon. In the mornings I got up, ate something for breakfast, then went to the shop, got the list, went to buy goods, and brought supplies from *Mandawi*. My brothers were in the army, and one brother, the fourth brother, was studying, so he could not help in the morning. When I brought the goods to the shop, I would leave for school. After school I stayed in the shop until evening, until the end of the day. Then I went home, ate one meal, and returned until the end of the day. During the communist government I also worked night shifts at the shop because of theft and things like that. I did this until grade 11. By grade 11

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my work had become lighter, because my brothers were in the shop with my father, so at night I would sleep in the shop.

Question: You said your other brothers were in the army. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Answer: I had one sister, who died 43 years ago. Her children are here. But now we are five brothers. I do not remember the brothers who died, because I was young when they died. Still, as you know, Hazara families have many children. I remember five brothers and one sister, though my sister died 43 years ago.

Question: What was your family's relationship to your community like? How close was it? And how was your family's relationship with other Hazara communities and non-Hazara communities?

Answer: Because our family was from Behsud, my father and grandfather were considered part of a large clan, and they had connections with all kinds of people. Whether they were Hazaras or others from the area, they were acquainted. Some matters, like jirgas among our Pashtun people or tribal councils, involved the fathers. They would decide things or help. In Kabul itself, because our family was there, my father was involved in religious matters, and my brothers were also involved in tribal and communal meetings. They made decisions or helped. In Kabul, my father's family was also active in religious matters, and my brothers took part in those tribal gatherings as well. When they went to India, they were also considered a large clan there. Even many people who were older would raise social issues with my elder brothers or ask for help with different tasks.

Question: When did your family go to India?

Answer: I was in India until 1986. I came to Canada in 1986. Then my fourth brother came to India after me. My older brothers, the first and second, came in the early 1990s — 1991 or 1992, I do not remember exactly. My third brother came from India to Canada in 1993.

Question: Which customs and festivals were important to you as a child? Eid, Nowruz...?

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Answer: Eid and Nowruz are important throughout Afghanistan, and everyone likes to be happy on those days. But the religious occasions that mattered to us were Imam's Day, the Imam's birthday, and celebrations of enthronement. These two festivals were held by the elders of the community in Afghanistan, and everyone took part.

Question: Which of those days excited you the most as a child?

Answer: Eid, Nowruz, and those Imam celebrations gave us a lot of joy, and everyone enjoyed them.

Question: Why did you enjoy them? Did you wear new clothes? Did you get Eidi?

Answer: Of course everyone got Eidi (Eid gift); it is a custom among Afghan families, and we enjoyed that. Almost all the children were happy.

Question: Were there special ceremonies that marked important stages of life, like a gathering for children, a gathering for youth, and a ceremony that everyone regarded as belonging to elders?

Answer: Naturally, because of the rules in Hazara society, or in other societies too, there were certain limits. Children were not allowed into the main gatherings of elders out of respect, and sometimes they were not even permitted. But I remember that there would be an elder who would arrange a separate room or special place for children, and someone would supervise them, especially regarding mealtime and certain things. Most children would spend Eid in the houses where Eid was being celebrated, going into the courtyard or out into the street to see what was happening, but mealtime would still bring everyone together. In any case, they had a supervisor who made sure the children followed order and discipline.

Question: If you choose one of these — the Day of Imamate, the Imam's birthday, or the enthronement day — can you explain what you usually did and how you celebrated it?

Answer: The enthronement day involved reading articles and talks. In the communal house, the elders gathered, and there were special guests, including government people and even non-Ismailis. They were given special hospitality. Friends who had special knowledge about the Imam would share it with the families and guests who were not Ismaili. After the article reading

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or the information session, there would be a festive meal prepared by the family, and the guests would be specially received. All the people would eat and enjoy it.

Question: Is there a saying or proverb you remember from your parents or grandparents that is still meaningful to you?

Answer: When one reflects on all the words of the elders, those proverbs remain from them. Young people today do not really have proverbs or real advice that becomes the foundation of something, unfortunately. But if there is knowledge elsewhere, everything can be found on the computer. Still, from a religious and social perspective, every word of theirs should be written in gold. Each one had a special meaning. Whether it is a grandfather, grandmother, or what we call **babai** in Hazaragi, each sentence was truly a special piece of advice. Many things come to mind. The first thing my father ever told me, which I still remember, was: “Whatever you do, there are two people you cannot hide it from: first God, and second yourself.” Whatever you do, whatever trick you try on the other side, you cannot hide it from yourself or from God. That had a great impact on me, and I tell my own children too: whatever you do, you cannot hide it. Try to stay on the right path. Every time you tell a lie, your lie becomes a second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth lie, and then you get lost. What my father told me — that no matter what you do, you cannot hide it — was very important to me. If a person thinks they have committed betrayal or theft or something similar, maybe no one can prove it, but you yourself know in your own conscience that you did it. That is the lesson. Whenever I did anything with friends, I remembered that saying. I never did anything that would make me ashamed before my own conscience.

Question: In everyday life, what foods or handicrafts were common, and what kept the men and women of the family busy? You said your father was in business.

Answer: My mother was at home, and her help was very important, because yogurt and cream were made at home. My mother was very busy making these things for the shop — yogurt, cream, and another thing I’ve forgotten, cheese. She prepared them at home, and my brother’s wife also helped. They were occupied with that because yogurt, especially during Ramadan, was in very high demand and very popular. The yogurt that my mother and my brother’s wife made was truly praised by every family that bought it from the shop.

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Question: Since you lived in Kabul, Hazara people there faced more restrictions and abuse. How did you express your Hazara identity, or your Hazara Ismaili identity?

Answer: From grade three onward, I remember standing up against every kind of bullying, whether you call it Hazara bullying or general harassment. From grade three, I remember that whenever there was anyone, whether from our own group or others — and yes, Hazaras can also have disagreements among themselves, but in general these disputes have been resolved — everyone knows that first comes being Hazara, then comes religion. For me, being Hazara was important, but religion also has real value for everyone, because it is the path of our fathers, and one should follow one's father's belief. When people harassed me because of my religion, I resisted even as a child. I fought back, made a scene, and did not let anyone humiliate me because of my religious identity. Everyone knew that among the few people who understood Ismaili religion, they were called Sayyid Kian. Sayyid Kian was the proof of the Imam in his time, and every Imam has his own proof in each era. Sayyid Kian and Sayyid Nader Khan were the proof of the forty-ninth Imam, who was Shakar Imam al-Husseini. All religious matters were entrusted to the Naderi family by the Imam himself. All religious issues during the Day of Imamate or the Imam's birthday were handled by the Naderi family; all ceremonies were organized by them. But slowly, thank God, the problems facing Hazaras disappeared. Our Twelver Shi'a Hazaras and our Ismaili Hazaras are now very close, which is a source of pride. And those who are truly educated and literate today understand history and have solved these issues completely. There are still some who have problems, but we try to solve them. Being Hazara is important to everyone because Hazaras are very scattered. We have Hazaras in Nepal, and there are Hazara-origin Communist Party groups in Nepal, and centuries ago there were two brothers who ruled in Kabul — I have forgotten their names, but I read history and a book written by an Indian professor about the Hazaras of Nepal and the Hazaras of Assam in India. Two brothers ruled; one brother moved toward India depending on the circumstances, and then the community split between India and Nepal. Hazaras who truly fled from the north are today in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and these are the original Hazaras of Afghanistan. If we study Hazara history in today's Afghanistan, we have 7,000 years of history. To prove this, a huge media source from Qatar, Al Jazeera, has in its archive 7,000 years of Hazara history.

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Question: Have you or your family ever faced specific problems in Afghanistan simply because you were Hazara?

Answer: If you speak generally, 90 percent of Hazaras have problems because they are Hazara. I cannot even say the number, because 90 percent face problems. These are called political problems. Today's politics is not independent for one ethnicity or one place, and many of our problems come from the West. There are people who accept Western power and want to force it on another group. Not all Hazaras have problems in the sense that if I am an Ismaili Hazara or a Twelver Shi'a Hazara, I have no problem. No, all Hazaras have problems. Perhaps some of those problems also come from us ourselves, because we have not been able to maintain unity and agreement very well. Thank God, some of these issues have lessened today.

Question: Can you tell us why and how you left Afghanistan and what route you took to reach Canada?

Answer: Yes. I finished grade 11, and some things happened during the communist government. Three bombs exploded in Kabul, and my older brothers decided that I should leave Afghanistan. They thought that since I was still young, I might someday be in a place where a bomb explodes or something happens, so my brother decided that I had to leave Afghanistan. I wanted to enter India with a visa, but it did not work. So I went to Iran illegally. I stayed in Iran for nine months, then from there we came to Pakistan and stayed in Pakistan for three or four months. Then I went to India. I stayed in India for four years, and from India I came to Canada. I did not come to Canada legally through sponsorship, because I was not accepted at the Canadian embassy in Delhi. Due to circumstances, with the financial help of friends, I came to Canada illegally.

Question: Through which route? Was it difficult?

Answer: My route was very difficult. The hardest part was from Kabul to Shindand and from Shindand to Iran, because we traveled at night with many problems. When we went from Shindand and Herat toward Iran, toward Birjand in Iran, we were in a truck that was supposed to hold 15 people, but we were about 70 or 80 people in it, packed in as tightly as if we had become

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bundles. Then from India, when I came illegally to Canada, I went from Kolkata to Thailand, then from Thailand to Tashkent, from Tashkent to Poland, and from Poland to Montreal in 1986.

Question: That was a very long route.

Answer: Very long, very complicated, and very frightening. Because my name was Spanish, I had a Spanish passport, and legally I was Hazara. But I entered Canada in 1986 without a lawyer. I had to defend myself because life in Afghanistan was so hard for ordinary people that whether you were communist, mujahid, or some other powerful person, life was difficult in every case. That is why I had to leave Afghanistan, and I had no other choice but to come to Canada illegally.

Question: Did your beliefs and faith help you continue and not stop along that difficult illegal route?

Answer: Since you asked about beliefs, if one thinks from the point of view of science or technology, one may reject beliefs. But from the standpoint of truth and the inner self, it is belief that has kept us alive today. To prove this, I can mention one flight I took from Dubai to Istanbul. It was supposed to be a short flight, but before reaching Istanbul, the plane dropped about 300 or 400 feet. It dropped, and the passenger beside me, who was Ismaili, and I myself as a Nizari Ismaili both said “Ya Ali.” With the words “Ya Ali,” the plane went back onto its course. This is my own experience; no one told me this. If you ask my wife, she will say I do not like flying because I became afraid of it. But if you think from the inward side of religion, all the sciences we have — science, technology, engineering, medicine — are under God’s knowledge. God created all knowledge. To prove it, if we look at a television, it is made of plastic, iron, aluminum, wires, and other things. Human beings extracted all those materials from beneath the earth. If they were taken from under the earth, that means God created that knowledge.

From the perspective of belief, let me also say that **jihad** in our understanding means knowledge. If you become educated, you have done jihad. That is, jihad means light against darkness. When you have light and you find yourself, that means you have found God’s knowledge. In Ismaili belief, the Quran is the book of all Muslims. If you discover the inner meaning of the Quran,

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then the inner meaning of the Quran is science, technology, every civilization you can name. It is within the Quran, and to prove this, Mawlana Rumi says we took the inner meaning of the Quran and gave the outer meaning to others. That is, the knowledge Rumi had, the great Rumi who loved Shams Tabrizi, means that when he found Shams Tabrizi he said, “Shams is mine, and God is mine.” These are things of religion. A pure belief is knowledge in itself. Some of the beliefs we have may seem absurd or superstitious, but if we think broadly, all religions are one, all faiths are one. The methods differ slightly, but if you enter the realm of knowledge, all of them are religion, because their creator is one. There is one creator. If one finds the first creation of God, it is the declaration of faith: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” From this declaration of faith, you can discover space technology, because we have several planets in the sky. From the perspective of biology, the declaration of faith is inside the human body. From the declaration of faith, God created human biology, the seven days of the week, the four seasons, and the 12 months. Everything was created from the declaration of faith. If you want to know what science and technology are, the Book of Wajidin by Hazrat Naser Khosrow explains these things.

Question: What does being an Ismaili Hazara mean to you today?

Answer: Being Hazara is important because when God created every human being, that person does not know in which place or which household they will be born. Whichever house they are born into is their nationality. What matters first is that they are human, and that they take pride in the fact that they are among the “noblest of creatures.” If a person is born in Japan, they are Japanese. If born in Europe, they are European, and so on. But Afghanistan is divided into nationalities. If I was born in a Hazara household, I must first take pride in humanity and in being Hazara, because today Hazaras have 7,000 years of history in Afghanistan. In the time of Alexander the Great, the most dangerous war he fought was in Bamiyan, according to Greek history. The people who fought against him at that time are described as those with narrow eyes, a less prominent nose, and Mongol features. I accept that today perhaps half a percent of Hazaras may have some blood relation with Mongols, but the fiercest battle with the Mongols was in Bamiyan, where the Hazaras live. The Buddhas of Bamiyan, which have 1,700 years of history,

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were built by Hazaras. Of course, at that time there was no Islam, and Buddhism was the religion; that is natural. Today, when we in Afghanistan accepted Islam, we accepted the religion and take pride in our faith because we want to know God's path. Some people speak of worship, some of knowing God; in my view, knowing God is more important than worship. But I take pride in being Hazara in Afghanistan because the technology behind the Bamiyan Buddhas — if you want to find it — from an engineering perspective, the mind cannot easily grasp how the clay materials used there were put together so strongly. No bomb could destroy them, and tank shells could not destroy them, until two engineers came from Dubai to Pakistan and, through help from Pakistan into Afghanistan, they used engineering methods with explosives to destroy the Bamiyan Buddhas. To prove my point, the person who told me this was a Pakistani who had close ties to Nawaz Sharif. During Nawaz Sharif's time, with Taliban support or with engineers brought from Dubai, this work happened in Bamiyan. If you speak from an engineering perspective, Europe at that time had no such technology 1,700 years ago or several hundred years ago. If you look at that clay, it is very difficult to understand what was mixed into it that made it so strong, and even the construction of that statue showed complete knowledge. It means the Hazaras built it.

Question: What stories and traditions do you hope Hazara youth will preserve in the future?

Answer: Being Hazara is truly an honor. The young people must learn this word: being Hazara is an honor, not a shame. Even though I myself am Ismaili, Bābā Mazari, a Hazara political leader, said that being Hazara is not shameful and not a sin. If it is not a sin, then it is not shameful, and the young people must understand that. But my own leader, the Naderi family, and especially Alhaj Sahib Mansur Naderi, said to me that he is my political leader, and the religious leader for you, but Bābā Mazari is also called a leader of the Hazaras, and that message should be accepted by all Hazaras and respected. Everyone says being Hazara is an honor. Those who do not understand this may not be Hazara, or may simply be confused. But being Hazara is an honor, not a shame. This word must be taught to our young people: being Hazara is an honor, not a shame.

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Question: When you think about the future of Hazaras, what worries you and what gives you hope?

Answer: What gives me pride and hope is that Hazaras today — whether Ismaili, Twelver Shi‘a, or Sunni Hazaras — are moving toward knowledge. That gives me a lot of hope. Nothing can be built without knowledge. Whatever you want to build, you must learn in practice. When people turn toward knowledge, hope is truly created and there is no longer much reason for worry. If we Hazaras move 100 percent toward knowledge, there will be no place for worry, because the person who has knowledge does not do things that bring shame. That removes worry. And in terms of beliefs, some problems still arise because older people — if we speak in terms of age — still hold certain beliefs, and those beliefs can still create problems. But our young people today join Western civilization, become connected, and understand what is going on, so those problems are reduced.

Question: Do you have any message for other Canadians so they can understand and learn about Hazaras?

Answer: The first thing I would say to young people is that in the society you live in, learn its customs and take the good from them. Second, in the Western world material life matters a great deal. Material things matter. Without knowledge and without effort, it is very hard to gain material success in the West. If someone does not know something, they should have an organization or group they can ask. That can reduce their problems. We Hazaras all know that our people have truly left a legacy of hard work. But I disagree with that a little. Hard work alone is not enough. If we do not adapt ourselves to the material system of the West with knowledge, we will not move forward. Today AI has come. My son says AI has many flaws, and it really does have flaws, but we are forced to learn it. AI can do many things, but more important than anything else, we must learn the commercial system. And most importantly, Hazaras must take part in Canadian politics. If you do not have a presence in the politics of your country, you have nothing. Along with that, the economy matters. In the Western economic system, you must build yourself up. Otherwise you fall behind. We already have fewer problems now. If the West takes AI and we do not have access to AI, we become the most backward people. Technology is very

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important, and we must engage with it. If you want to know science and technology, even Imam Ali, the first Imam, is said to have said that if you want knowledge, you must learn it, even if it is in China. That means nothing is built without knowledge. AI may currently be harmful because I understand a little about AI technology, and my son understands it too. My son has said it has many flaws. I do not want to go into that area too much because it uses a lot of energy, and in proof of that China has now built something beneath the water because China is trying to stay ahead technologically. But in the West a great deal of energy is used. The amount of energy it consumes is enormous. Still, learning it is not bad.

Question: And what message do you have for non-Hazara Canadians? What would you like them to understand about Hazara history and culture?

Answer: This is connected to our people. I remember Ambassador Berna Karimi said something that made me very happy. Wherever she is, I truly take pride in Ambassador Karimi. Every community should have its own ambassador. If we are good ambassadors — politically, economically, culturally, and in terms of customs and traditions — then we can make everyone understand what Hazara means. We should understand it ourselves first. No one has much interest in learning about another people unless there is a good ambassador. If we are good ambassadors, we can explain who the Hazaras are and what their strengths and weaknesses are. Everyone should try to learn the good and leave the bad. Parents should tell this to their children: in the West, learn Western customs, but learn only the good ones. Afghanistan has customs too; it has excellent customs, though there are some restrictions. Our children should understand that our customs matter, but they should not adopt the restrictions. Some of those restrictions violate women's rights. But in general everyone says paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers. A mother is a woman. Respect for women is obligatory, and the Prophet himself said so. The Prophet's daughter, Lady Fatima, according to our understanding, was a praying woman, led prayer, and taught prayer to the people. We ourselves must become good ambassadors, first as ambassadors of the Hazaras and second as ambassadors of Afghanistan, so that Afghanistan can be governed well. As proof of this, when Maryam Jan became Minister for Women's Affairs, the world understood that Afghans are not only about war; they are capable of many things. During

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Karzai's time, the best period for Hazara literacy was created. I know Karzai was not some king who had ruled for 200 or 300 years and served the people, but Karzai helped the communities in this matter, and Hazaras became more educated. The more educated Hazaras become, God willing, the fewer problems there will be.

Question: Is there anything you would like to add that I have not asked?

Answer: The one thing I truly want is for us to have a national language — a national language in the sense that when you meet a Hazara and ask a question, if he says “yes,” there should be no need for a second question. If he says “yes,” then he is Hazara. Once he says yes, it should not matter to ask what religion he follows or where he is from. These extra questions weaken Hazara unity. Our national language is this “yes” — these very common words used by all Hazaras. Once you hear that “yes,” do not ask any more questions, do not ask what religion, what province, or what village. If we remove this issue, God willing, our problems will lessen.