



AFGHANISTAN

Lessons in Terror

Attacks on Education in Afghanistan

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Lessons in Terror Attacks on Education in Afghanistan



Lessons in Terror examines the impact of insecurity on education in Afghanistan. This brochure presents a summary of the report's findings and recommendations.



Attacks by armed opposition groups on Afghan teachers, students, and their schools have occurred throughout much of Afghanistan in recent months, particularly in the south and southeast of the country.

Teachers have been killed, even beheaded, schools have been blown up or burned down, and students have been warned against attending school. The rate of these attacks has escalated sharply, part of a growing crisis of instability for ordinary Afghans.

Resurgent opposition forces, local warlords, and increasingly powerful criminal gangs have committed these abuses to terrorize the civilian population and contest the authority of the central government and its foreign supporters. Such attacks infringe upon the fundamental right to education. When committed as part of the ongoing armed conflict in Afghanistan, these attacks are serious violations of international humanitarian law—they are war crimes.

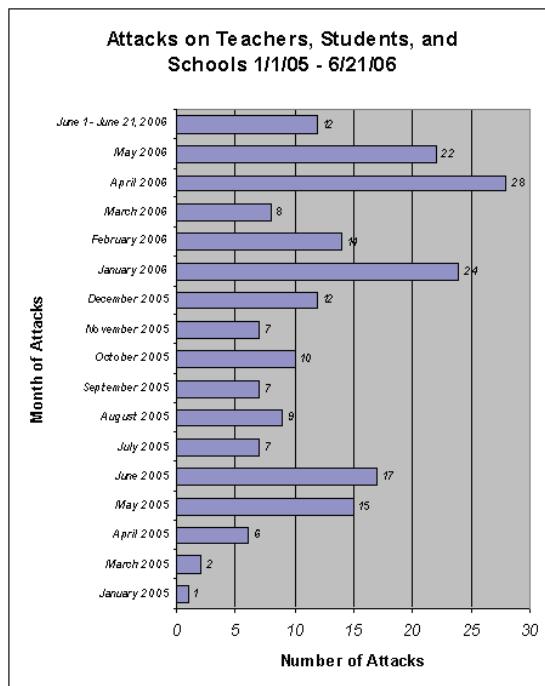
Attacks on teachers students. and schools increased sharply in late 2005 and the first half of 2006.

This confrontation has stunted and, in some places, even stopped the development and reconstruction work so desperately desired and needed by local residents. This report examines the impact of these attacks on education in Afghanistan, especially on girls' education.

These attacks, and the inability of the government and its international backers to stop them, demonstrate the deteriorating security conditions under which many Afghans are now living. While ultimate responsibility lies with the perpetrators, much about the response of the international community and the Afghan government can and must be improved if Afghanistan is to move forward. The situation is not hopeless, yet.

Another Generation at Risk

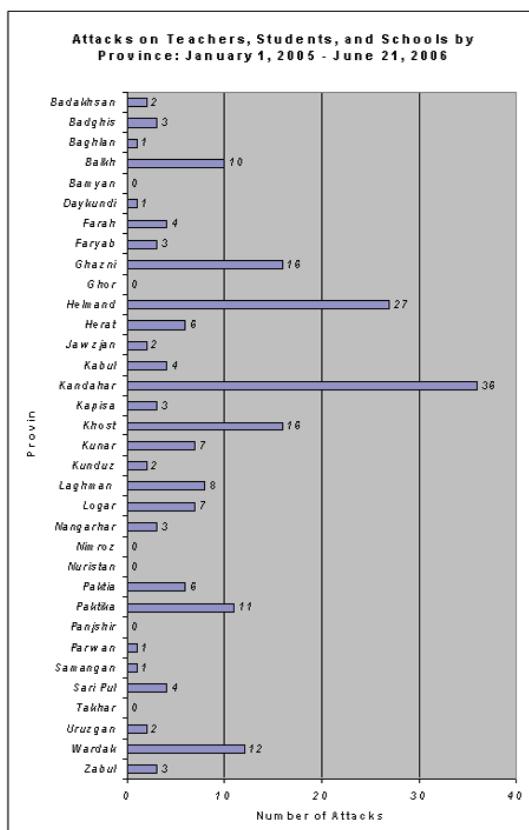
Attacks on all aspects of the education process sharply increased in late 2005 and the first half of 2006. As of this writing, more attacks have been reported in the first half of 2006 than in all of 2005. Previously secure schools, such as girls' schools in Kandahar city and in northern provinces such as Balkh, have come under attack. There have been reports of at least seventeen assassinations of teachers and education officials in 2005 and 2006; several are detailed below. This report also documents more than 204 attacks on teachers, students, and schools in the past eighteen months (January 2005 to June 21, 2006).



Even more common have been threatening "night letters," alone or preceding actual attacks, distributed in mosques, around schools, and, and on routes taken by students and teachers, warning them against attending school and making credible threats of violence.

Physical attacks or threats against schools and their staff hurt education directly, by destroying schools and intimidating teachers and students, and indirectly, by causing schools in the surrounding area to shut down.

Single episodes of violence, even in far away districts, influence whether teachers, parents, and students continue going to school. Parents often have a lower threshold for pulling their daughters out of school than boys, given greater social restrictions on girls' movements and legitimate concerns about sexual harassment and violence.



Attacks on teachers, students, and schools have happened throughout Afghanistan—but especially in provinces in the south and southeast.

General insecurity and attacks on education exacerbate other barriers that keep children, particularly girls, from school:

- poverty;
- distance and unavailability of schools;
- poor school infrastructure;
- shortage of qualified teachers, especially women teachers;
- low quality of teaching; and
- negative attitudes about secular education generally or girls' education in particular.

Most girls in Afghanistan are still not in school. Many children in rural areas have no access to schools at all. One reason is insecurity.

Plight of the Education System

Since the United States and its coalition partners ousted the Taliban from power in 2001, progress has been made: 5.2 million people are in formal schools, about one-third girls and women. But the situation is far from what it could or should be, particularly for girls.

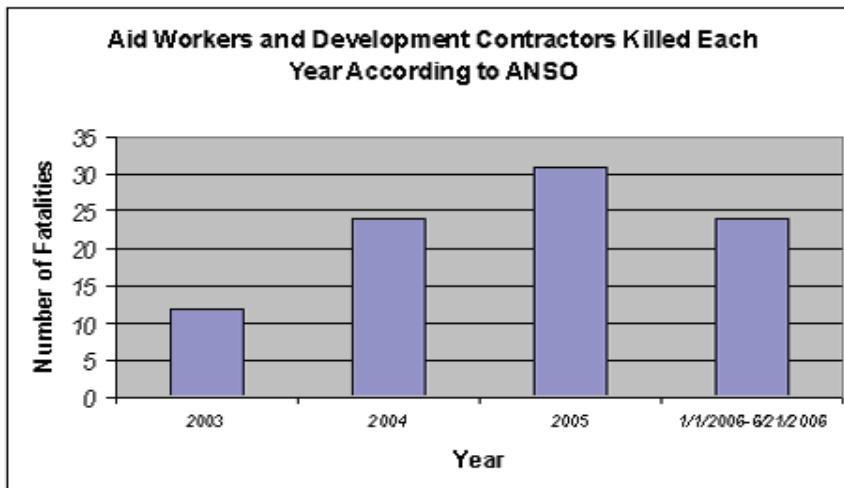
- The majority of primary-school-age girls remain out of school, and many children in rural areas have no access to schools at all.
- At the secondary level, the numbers are far worse: gross enrollment rates were only 5 percent for girls in 2004, compared with 20 percent for boys.
- The gains of the past four-and-a-half years appear to have reached a plateau. The Ministry of Education told Human Rights Watch that it did not expect total school enrollments to increase in 2006; indeed, they expect new enrollments to decrease by 2008 as refugee returns level off.
- In areas where students do attend school, the quality of education is extremely low.

An Escalating Crisis of Insecurity

Insecurity affects all aspects of Afghans' lives: their ability to work, to reach medical care, to go to the market, and to attend school. Afghan women and girls, who have always confronted formidable social and historical barriers to traveling freely or receiving an education, especially under the Taliban and their mujahedin predecessors, are particularly hard hit.

Insecurity, and the attendant difficulty it causes for government agencies, foreign reconstruction groups, and aid organizations, has also distorted national-level reconstruction policies in Afghanistan. Southern and southeastern Afghanistan, which have suffered most from insecurity, have witnessed a significant drop in reconstruction activity.

Attacks against Afghan government officials and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have made it too dangerous for them to open new schools or forced them out of some areas.



Many NGOs, which play a significant role in providing education and other development activities in Afghanistan, no longer feel it is safe to operate outside of urban areas and off major roads linking them. As of this writing—midway through 2006—already twenty-four aid workers have been killed in Afghanistan this year, a significant increase from the rates seen in previous years, when thirty-one aid workers were killed in 2005 and twenty-four in 2004.

The failure to provide adequate aid to southern and southeastern Afghanistan also has significant political impact because it has fostered resentment against the perceived failures and biases of the central Afghan government and its international supporters. Afghans in the largely Pashtun south and southeast complain when they see more development aid and projects go to non-Pashtun areas in other parts of the country. Lacking the ability to confront the security threats facing them, they feel that they are being doubly punished—by the Taliban and criminal groups who impinge on their security, and by international aid providers being driven away due to (justified) fear of the Taliban, other opposition elements, and criminal groups.

Responsible parties include the Taliban, other armed opposition groups, regional warlords, and criminal groups.

Sources and Impact of Insecurity

Insecurity in Afghanistan is most dire in the country's south and southeast, although it is by no means limited to those areas. The problem is particularly acute outside of larger urban areas and off major roads, where an estimated 70 percent of Afghans reside and where U.S. forces, the International Security Assistance Force led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and Afghanistan's small but growing security forces rarely reach.

Three different (and at times overlapping) groups are broadly responsible for causing insecurity in Afghanistan:

- opposition armed forces, primarily the Taliban and forces allied with the Taliban movement or with veteran Pashtun warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar,
- regional warlords and militia commanders, ostensibly loyal to the central government, now entrenched as powerbrokers after the flawed parliamentary elections of October 2005, and
- criminal groups, mostly involved in Afghanistan's booming narcotics trade—a trade which is believed to provide much of the financing for the warlords and opposition forces.

It is clear that many attacks on teachers, students, and schools have been carried out by Taliban forces (now apparently a confederation of mostly Pashtun tribal militias and political groups) or groups allied with the Taliban, such as the forces of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami (previously bitter rivals of the Taliban). But the Taliban are clearly not the only perpetrators of such attacks, because in many areas local observers and Human Rights Watch's investigation indicated the involvement of militias of local warlords or criminal groups.

The motives behind the attacks differ. In some instances, it appears that the attacks are motivated by ideological opposition to education generally or to girls' education specifically. In other instances schools and teachers may be attacked as symbols of the government (often the only government presence in an area) or, if run by international nongovernmental organizations, as the work of foreigners. In a few cases, the attacks seem to reflect local grievances and rivalries.

Insufficient Response to Insecurity

This crisis of insecurity, now affecting millions of Afghans, was predictable and avoidable. The international community, led by the United States, has consistently failed to provide the economic, political, and military support necessary for securing the most basic rights of the Afghan people. Groups opposed to the authority of the Afghan central government and its international supporters have increasingly filled this vacuum, using tactics such as suicide bombings and attacks on "soft targets" such as schools and teachers to instill terror in ordinary Afghans and thus turn them away from a central government that is unable to protect them.

International military and economic aid to Afghanistan remains a fraction of that disbursed in other recent post-conflict situations.

The international community has shortchanged Afghanistan's security and development since the fall of the Taliban both qualitatively and quantitatively. International military and economic aid to Afghanistan was, and remains, a fraction of that disbursed by the international community in other recent post-conflict situations.

The international community's chief tool for providing security and local development in Afghanistan has been the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), military units ranging in size from eighty to three hundred military personnel combined with a small number (usually about 10 percent of the total) of civilians from a development background or the diplomatic corps.

The PRTs were conceived of as a blend of military frontier posts and humanitarian and development aid providers. This has proven to be an uneasy combination, from the military point of view as well as in terms of development. There is no coherent nationwide strategy for the PRTs, nor are there any clear benchmarks for their performance. Each PRT reports to its own national capital, and, despite some efforts at coordination, does not share information or lessons learned with other PRTs. The PRTs have succeeded in improving security and development only in fairly limited areas, primarily in northern and central Afghanistan. But the PRTs have not provided an adequate response to the broader problem of insecurity in Afghanistan, as evidenced by the country's overall deteriorating security situation. Nor have they been particularly successful at providing development or humanitarian assistance.

Needed: A New Benchmark

Human Rights Watch urges that access to education be used as a key benchmark to measure the success of Afghan and international efforts to bring security to Afghanistan. Measuring the deleterious impact of insecurity on education provides a strong diagnostic indicator of the costs of insecurity more generally.

Education is central to the realization of other human rights, such as freedom of expression, association, and assembly; full participation in one's community; and freedom from discrimination, sexual exploitation, and the worst forms of child labor. Education also facilitates many other socially important activities, such as improvements in the economy, development of the rule of law, and public health.

Education should be a key benchmark of the success or failure of international efforts to bring security to Afghanistan.

Restrictions on girls' right to education especially hurt the country's development: for example, girls' and women's literacy is associated with lower infant and maternal mortality and, unsurprisingly, better education for future generations of children. Girls not educated today are the missing teachers, administrators, and policymakers of tomorrow. After the Taliban, Afghanistan cannot afford to lose another generation. Such a tragedy would compound the misfortune the already beleaguered nation has faced.

We suggest this benchmark for three reasons:

- on a political level, because teachers and schools are typically the most basic level of government and the most common point of interaction (in many villages the only point of contact) between ordinary Afghans and their government;
- on a practical level, because this benchmark lends itself to diagnostic, nationally comparable data analysis (for instance, the number of operational schools, the number of students, the enrollment of girls) focused on outcomes instead of the number of troops or vague references to providing security;
- on a policy level, because providing education to a new generation of Afghans is essential to the country's long-term development.

Using this benchmark and placing the well-being of the Afghan people at the center of the security policy in Afghanistan will help implement policies that respond to and strengthen the inextricable link between development and security.

During Ramadan [late 2005], the girls were still going to school. There was a letter posted on the community's mosque saying that "men who are working with NGOs and girls going to school need to be careful about their safety. If we put acid on their faces or they are murdered, then the blame will be on the parents." . . . After that, we were scared and talked about it, but we decided to let them keep going anyway. But after Eid, a second letter was posted on the street near to there, and the community decided that it was not worth the risk [and stopped all girls over age ten from going to school]. . . . My daughters are afraid—they are telling us "we'll get killed and be lying on the streets and you won't even know."

— Mother of two girls withdrawn from fourth and fifth grades in Kandahar city, December 8, 2005

Recommendations

To the Taliban, Hezb-e Islami, and other armed groups

- Immediately stop all attacks on civilians and civilian objects, including teachers, students, and their schools.
- Cease all threats against teachers and students, such as through the use of night letters.
- Publicly declare an end to such attacks and threats.
- Provide and facilitate safe, rapid, and unimpeded access to impartial humanitarian assistance to civilians in need.

To the Government of Afghanistan

- The government of Afghanistan and the coordinating body of the Afghanistan Compact should make access to education a benchmark for measuring compliance with the Compact, which sets out security as one of the three pillars of activity for the next five years.
- The government, with the assistance of the international community, should devise and implement a strategy to monitor, prevent, and respond to attacks on education.

Recommendations regarding improving girls' and women's access to education

- President Karzai should remove any appointed leaders who oppose girls' education, including governors, police chiefs, cabinet ministers, and education officials.
- The Council of Ulema, the highest religious authority in Afghanistan, should publicly state that it supports girls' education at all levels.
- The Afghan government should make greater efforts to discourage under-age marriage and to enforce the 2004 presidential decree lifting the prohibition against married girls and women attending school.

Recommendations regarding international military, peacekeeping, and reconstruction operations in Afghanistan

- ISAF and the U.S.-led Coalition should measure security by whether security conditions allow people to conduct their lives.
- PRTs should improve national-level coordination among themselves and with Afghan authorities, the United Nations, and local communities. PRTs should improve communication with national and international NGOs.

This report is available online at <http://hrw.org/reports/2006/afghanistan0706/>

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Most Afghan girls still do not attend school more than four years after the Taliban were replaced by the government of President Hamid Karzai. For many, the reason is insecurity: it is simply too dangerous for students and their teachers to go to school, or for aid organizations and the Afghan government to construct new schools. Afghanistan's education system is increasingly the target of attacks by the Taliban and other armed groups opposing the central government and its international backers. Human Rights Watch has documented more than 200 incidents from January 2005 to June 21, 2006, of teachers and students being killed or threatened, and schools being blown up or burned down.

These attacks, and the inability of the government and its international backers to stop them, demonstrate the deteriorating security conditions under which millions of Afghans now live. Afghanistan's epidemic of insecurity is hampering the crucial process of development and reconstruction, robbing another generation of Afghans of the opportunity to enjoy fundamental rights: to seek health care, to go to the market, and to go to school.

This growing crisis was predictable and avoidable. The international community, led by the United States, failed to provide the economic, political, and military support necessary for securing the most basic rights of the Afghan people. As this report demonstrates, this power vacuum was exploited by the Taliban and other armed opposition groups carrying out suicide bombings and attacks on "soft targets" such as schools and teachers to instill terror in ordinary Afghans and thus demonstrate the central government's inability to protect them. These attacks are war crimes.

Human Rights Watch calls on the Taliban and others responsible to immediately halt these attacks. Human Rights Watch also calls on the Afghan government and the international community to place the welfare and security of ordinary Afghans at the heart of their policies.

Right: An education official points to the spot where an explosive device was left at the front of the class of a girls' school in Wardak province in late 2005. The mine was defused but the school building was abandoned. "Of course I'm anxious, for my own daughters—it's not fear, it's frustration. How long will this last? What do these people want?", he told Human Rights Watch.

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Front cover: An abandoned girls' school in Wardak province, just south of Kabul, vacated in late 2005 because students discovered an explosive device left inside. A threatening "night letter" ordering the school to be closed was left at the local mosque before the attempted attack.

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