

I. Summary

From fear of terrorism, from threats of the enemies of Afghanistan, today as we speak, some 100,000 Afghan children who went to school last year, and the year before last, do not go to school.

—President Karzai on International Women’s Day,
March 8, 2006.

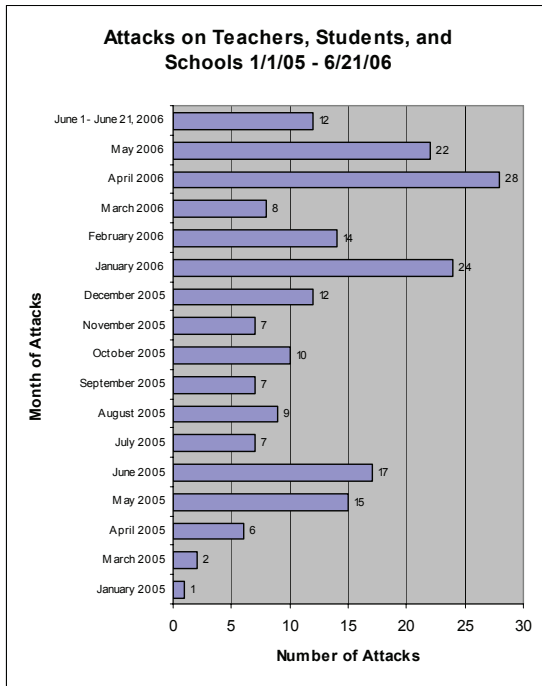
During Ramadan [late 2005], the girls were still going to school. There was a letter posted on the community’s mosque saying that “men who are working with NGOs and girls going to school need to be careful about their safety. If we put acid on their faces or they are murdered, then the blame will be 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—Mother of two girls withdrawn from fourth and fifth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, Kandahar city, December 8, 2005.

Brutal 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. 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.

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. As detailed below, 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. Such attacks are not just criminal offenses in violation of Afghan law; they are abuses that 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.

Insecurity—including acts designed to instill terror in civilians, actual fighting between rival groups or armed opposition groups and international security forces, and rampant lawlessness—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.

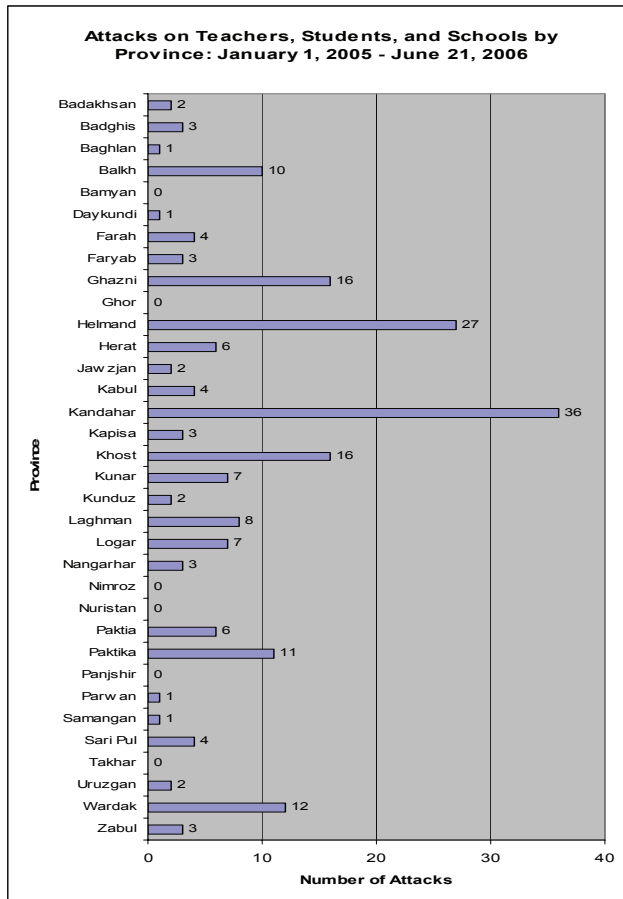


This report examines the impact of insecurity on education in Afghanistan, especially on girls’ education. It concentrates on armed attacks on the education system in the south and southeast of the country, where resurgent opposition forces, local warlords, and increasingly powerful criminal groups have committed abuses aimed at terrorizing the civilian population and contesting the authority of the central government and its foreign supporters. This confrontation has stunted and, in some places, even stopped the development and reconstruction work so desperately desired and needed by local residents.

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 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 and indirectly. Directly, an attack may force a school to close, either because the building is destroyed or because the teachers and students are too afraid to attend. Attacks and threats may also have an indirect ripple effect, causing schools in the surrounding area to shut down as well.



Where schools do not close altogether, each incident influences the risk assessment that parents and students undertake every day. Single episodes of violence, even in far away districts, accumulate to establish a pattern; in a country as traumatized by violence as Afghanistan, teachers, parents, and students are keenly attuned to fluctuations in this pattern and decide to continue—or stop—going to school based on how they view the general climate of insecurity. 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. As a result of the cumulative impact of attacks and closures over the past three years, schools, which were only recently opened or reopened, have once again been shut down in many districts in the south and southeast. In many districts in these areas, no schools operate at all.

General insecurity and violence targeted against education also exacerbate other barriers that keep children, particularly girls, from going to school. These include having to travel a long way to the nearest school or having no school available at all; poor school infrastructure; a shortage of qualified teachers, especially women teachers; the low quality of teaching; and poverty. All of these factors affect, and are affected by, Afghanistan’s varied but conservative culture. Each has a greater impact on girls and women, in large part because there are far fewer girls’ schools than boys’ schools.

Measuring the deleterious impact of insecurity on education provides a strong diagnostic indicator of the costs of insecurity more generally. Basic education is important for children’s intellectual and social development and provides them with critical skills for leading productive lives as citizens and workers. 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. 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.

In focusing on the nexus between insecurity and access to education, we seek to establish new benchmarks for assessing the performance of Afghan and international security forces and measuring progress on the security front. The benchmarks most often used at present—numbers of Afghan troops trained and international troops deployed, or the number of armed opponents killed—are important, but they do not accurately assess the security situation. What is more important is how much these and related efforts improve the day-to-day security of the Afghan people. We urge that access to education be made one key benchmark.

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; and,
- on a policy level, because providing education to a new generation of Afghans is essential to the country's long-term development.

Plight of the Education System

The Taliban's prohibition on educating girls and women was rightly viewed as one of their most egregious human rights violations, even for a government notorious for operating without respect for basic human rights and dignities. But even before the Taliban, the mujahedin factions that ripped the country apart between 1992 and 1996 often opposed modern education, in particular the education of girls.

Since the United States and its coalition partners ousted the Taliban from power in 2001, Afghans throughout the country have told Human Rights Watch that they want their children—including girls—to be educated. Afghans have asked their government and its

international supporters to help create the infrastructure and environment necessary for educating their children.

A great deal of progress has been made. When the Taliban were forced from power, many students returned to school. According to the World Bank, an estimated 774,000 children attended school in 2001.¹ By 2005, with girls' education no longer prohibited and with much international assistance, 5.2 million children were officially enrolled in grades one through twelve, according to the Ministry of Education.² (All statistics on education in Afghanistan should be understood as rough approximations at best.)

Despite these improvements, the situation is far from what it could or should have been, 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.³ Moreover, 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.⁴ In areas where students do attend school, the quality of education is extremely low.

Two critical factors are, first, that attacks on teachers, students, and schools by armed groups have forced schools to close, and, second, that attacks against representatives of the Afghan government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), along with general lawlessness, has made it too dangerous for them to open new schools or continue to operate in certain areas. Where schools do remain open, parents are often afraid to send their children—in particular, girls—to school. The continuing denial of education to most Afghan children is a human rights crisis that should be of serious concern to those who strive to end Afghanistan's savage cycle of violence and war.

¹ World Bank, "GenderStats: Database of Gender Statistics," <http://devdata.worldbank.org/> (retrieved April 17, 2006).

² Ministry of Education, *Education Management Information System* (draft), 2004-2005. The now commonly cited figure of 6 million includes adults and children outside of formal schools: 55,500-57,000 people (of whom only around 4,000-5,000 are girls and women) enrolled in vocational, Islamic, and teacher education programs, and 1.24 million people enrolled in non-formal education. Human Rights Watch interview with Mahammeed Azim Karbalai, Director, Planning Department, Ministry of Education, Kabul, March 11, 2006.

³ World Bank, "GenderStats: Database of Gender Statistics." The gross school enrollment ratio is the number of children enrolled in a school level (primary or secondary), regardless of age, divided by the population of the age group that officially corresponds to the same level. By comparison, the net school enrollment ratio is the number of children enrolled in a school level who belong to the age group that officially corresponds to that level, divided by the total population of the same age group.

⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Mohammed Azim Karbalai, Director, Planning Department, Ministry of Education, Kabul, March 11, 2006.

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: (1) opposition armed forces, primarily the Taliban and forces allied with the Taliban movement or with veteran Pashtun warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, (2) regional warlords and militia commanders, ostensibly loyal to the central government, now entrenched as powerbrokers after the flawed parliamentary elections of October 2005, and (3) 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. Each of the above groups attempts to impose their rule on the local population, disrupt or subvert the activity of the central government, and either divert development aid into their own coffers or block development altogether.

In many cases that Human Rights Watch investigated, we were not able to determine with certainty either who was behind a particular attack or the cause. But 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 (for instance in Wardak province, where forces loyal to the warlord Abdul Rabb al Rasul Sayyaf hold sway) or criminal groups (such as those controlling smuggling routes in Kandahar and Helmand provinces).

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. Regardless of the motivation of the attackers, the result is the same: Afghanistan's educational system, one of the weakest in the world, is facing a serious and worsening threat.

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.

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. Several large international NGOs told Human Rights Watch in December 2005 that they had curtailed their activities in the south and southeast or aborted plans to operate there as a result of insecurity. Afghan NGOs also face significant constraints. Together, security, logistical, and infrastructural limitations are keeping organizations out of the areas where their assistance is most needed. A senior Western education expert working in Afghanistan expressed his apprehension about this phenomenon: “We are very concerned about disparities that we’re creating. We’re not covering the whole country. There are some places in the country that have never seen a U.N. operation.”⁵

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.

International and Afghan Response to Insecurity

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. For the past four years, Afghanistan’s government and its international supporters, chiefly the United States, have understood security mostly as a matter of the relative dominance of various armed forces. Presented this way, addressing insecurity revolves around matters such as troop numbers, geographic coverage, and political allegiance. Development and reconstruction become viewed as part of a “hearts and minds” campaign necessary to placate a potentially hostile population—not as

⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with high-level U.N. staffer who requested anonymity because he did not want to publicize internal U.N. debates, Kabul, December 5, 2005.

preconditions for a healthy, peaceful, and stable society, and certainly not as steps toward the realization of the fundamental human rights of the Afghan people.

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 PRT program, initially developed by the United States to compensate for the inadequate troop numbers committed to secure Afghanistan after the Taliban, eventually became the template for international security assistance. After three years, the PRT program has now expanded to most of Afghanistan's provinces; as of this writing there are twenty-three PRTs operating in Afghanistan (note, however, that the presence of small PRTs in a province does not necessarily mean there is geographic coverage of the province outside PRT headquarters). The United States still operates the most PRTs, all of them now in southern and southeastern Afghanistan, where military threats are more pronounced. Other countries, mostly under the umbrella of NATO, including the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, and Germany, as well as non-NATO U.S. allies such as New Zealand, also field PRTs. The U.K., Canada, and the Netherlands have begun moving PRTs into some provinces in southern Afghanistan since mid-2005. NATO is scheduled to take over security in southern Afghanistan by mid 2006.

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 handful of public assessments of the PRTs' performance have generally agreed that thus far, the PRTs have succeeded in improving security and development only in fairly limited areas, primarily in northern and central Afghanistan. In this sense PRTs may be considered to have been successful within their limited areas of operation. 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.

Key Recommendations

The government of Afghanistan is ultimately responsible for the security of the Afghan people. The Afghan army and police forces operate with varying degrees of effectiveness. In practice, U.S.-led coalition forces and NATO provide much of the security structure throughout the country, and particularly in the south and other volatile areas. As the responsibility for providing security in southern Afghanistan shifts from the U.S.-led coalition to NATO forces,

Human Rights Watch believes that a key measure of their success or failure should be whether children are able to go to school. This will require a military and policing strategy that directly addresses how to provide the security necessary for the Afghan government and its international supporters to develop Afghanistan's most difficult and unserved areas.

The Afghan government and the international community have not developed adequate policy responses to the impact of increasing insecurity on development in general, and education in particular—a particularly sensitive topic because education is often touted as one of the major successes of the post-Taliban government in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, the international community and the Afghan government have failed to address this policy shortcoming in the “Afghanistan Compact,” the blueprint for Afghanistan's reconstruction agreed upon after a major international conference in London in January 2006. While the compact lists security as one of the key components of Afghanistan's reconstruction, security is discussed in terms of troop numbers, instead of whether the composition and mission of these forces is sufficient to improve security for the population at risk. The compact explicitly links itself with the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, but development goals—more broadly speaking, the notion of human security—do not appear among the benchmarks used to measure security. In implementing the compact, the Afghan government and the international community should ensure that they refocus their security efforts on fostering a climate conducive to the necessary work of development and reconstruction.

Human Rights Watch urges the Afghan government, NATO, and U.S.-led coalition forces to implement a coherent, nationwide security policy firmly tethered to the development needs of the Afghan people. A critical benchmark of success in improving security should be whether Afghans can exercise their basic rights, starting with access to basic education. Such a benchmark should be explicitly incorporated into the Afghanistan Compact.

Human Rights Watch also urges NATO and the U.S.-led Coalition to improve coordination between their PRTs and the government; to improve communication with aid organizations, and, within six months, to assess whether they have committed resources (troops, materiel, and development assistance) sufficient to meet set goals.

Finally, given the emergence of schools as a frontline in Afghanistan's internal military conflict, Human Rights Watch urges the government and its international supporters to immediately develop and implement a policy specifically designed to monitor, prevent, and respond to attacks on teachers, students, and educational facilities.

More detailed recommendations can be found at the end of this report.

* * *

This report is based on Human Rights Watch research in Afghanistan from May to July 2005, and from December 2005 to May 2006, as well as research by telephone and electronic mail from New York. In Afghanistan we visited the provinces of Balkh, Ghazni, Herat, Kabul, Kapisa, Laghman, Logar, Kandahar, Nangarhar, Paktia, Parwan, and Wardak. We also spoke in person and by telephone with people from other provinces, including Helmand and Zabul, which we were unable to visit due to security concerns. During the course of our investigations, we interviewed more than two hundred individuals, including teachers, principals, and other school officials; students; staff of Afghan and international NGOs; government officials responsible for education at the district, provincial, and national levels; staff of the Ministry of Women's Affairs; members of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission; police officials; staff of the European Union, World Bank, USAID and its contractors, and the United Nations, including the U.N. Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM); officials from NATO; and other experts on education or security in Afghanistan. Many Afghans asked that their names not be used, fearing retaliation for identifying opposition groups, including the Taliban and local strongmen, that they believe are responsible for the attacks on schools documented in this report. "I'm afraid of this attack, this terrorism," a man working in Logar told us. "Don't mention our names in this report. There is no security. We don't feel secure in border areas."⁶ Similarly, many NGO staff and others working in the field of education requested anonymity, reflecting both fear of these groups and pressure to maintain a positive picture of education in Afghanistan in the face of crisis.

All numbers in this report regarding education should be understood as rough estimates only—data are incomplete and those which are available are often unreliable and conflicting.⁷ Figures on school enrollment for 2005-2006 are those provided by the Ministry of Education to Human Rights Watch. The most comprehensive data on factors affecting participation in education available at the time of writing remains that of two nearly nationwide surveys conducted in 2003: the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA).⁸ The 2006 briefing paper of Afghan Research & Evaluation Unit (AREU) entitled "Looking Beyond the School Walls: Household Decision-Making and School Enrollment in Afghanistan" also provides valuable insights regarding several key areas of the country.

⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with NGO education staff member working in Logar and Ghazni, December 20, 2005.

⁷ Almost everyone Human Rights Watch interviewed involved in education policy cautioned that education statistics in Afghanistan were unreliable. Although a national Education Management Information System (EMIS) was made available in 2006, problems with the data's collection have called into question their accuracy.

⁸ Even with these surveys, insecurity prevented surveyors from reaching some districts.