

Afghan Children Lured to Fight with Taleban

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Former child soldiers describe how they were groomed and recruited by the insurgents.

Safdar Shah is only 15 but already a veteran of six month's combat service with the Taleban.

The teenager, from the eastern province of Nangarhar, ran away from the militant group when his homesickness became too much to bear and now says he regrets ever joining in the first place.

Speaking to IWPR in an alley outside his home in the provincial capital Jalalabad, Shah recounted how he had been groomed and recruited by a close relative who taught at a madrasa, or religious school.

The boy was shown photographs of victims reportedly killed by US air strikes as well as repeatedly told stories of coalition troops assaulting Afghan women.

"I grew more and more emotional over what I was told was happening and eventually agreed to join the Taleban and fight jihad," he said. "We were told by commanders that our country had been invaded and occupied by non-believers, that it was our duty to help liberate it."

On his first day as a recruit Shah was trained to fire a Kalashnikov AK-47 and taught how to patrol, before going on to spend almost six months fighting alongside the Taleban in various parts of Nangarhar.

He said he began to question his commitment to the insurgency after he had a dream that his mother was urging him to return home.

"When I decided I wanted to leave I asked my commander for permission but he got angry with me," he continued. "He refused to grant me permission to go home so I made up my mind to escape in secret while out on patrol at night.

"I walked for hours until I finally reached a road. From there I managed to get a lift in a car."

Shah's father, Qadir, 43, said his family had been distraught by the teenager's disappearance. He claimed the boy's mother had become sick with worry while he had searched high and low in the hope of bringing him home safely.

"When my son suddenly disappeared I looked everywhere for him, including hospitals," he said. "When he came back to us after six months we couldn't believe it was him."

Although the Taleban has denied using child soldiers, former combatants and local officials in Nangarhar confirmed that underage boys were being recruited to the insurgency, with some fearing that their numbers were increasing.

Abdul Wahid Hakimi, Nangarhar's lead juvenile prosecutor, said he was aware of 30 cases of young teenagers joining the Taleban and other armed insurgent groups over the last 12 months.

He said he believed the number represented a concerning rise on previous years.

"We know that faked promotional videos are played to students in madrasas under the control of these armed groups," he said. "They deliberately paint the Afghan government in a bad light. The insurgents set out to deceive and mislead children in this way.

"They tell them non-believers have come into Afghanistan and that Afghans should rise up against them. Children are told they'll go to heaven if killed."

That was also the experience of Mohammad Sajid, 16, who now sells bananas in Nangarhar after serving a prison sentence for joining the Taleban.

He too was recruited by teachers at a madrasa, although in this instance he was living in Pakistan at the time.

Sajid said he ended up fighting alongside the Taleban, planting numerous improvised explosive devices (IEDs), for a period of 13 months.

"I was planting bombs under bridges in areas where the Taleban were fighting for control," he revealed. "Because I was so young, few people paid attention to what I was doing."

He was caught by authorities while buying groceries at a market in Ghani Khel district and later sentenced to a year and-a-half in prison.

As is the case internationally, Afghan law provides separate sentencing guidelines for children and adults.

According to article 39 of the country's Penal Code Individuals aged between 12 and 15 can only receive up to one-third of the sentence of an adult convicted of the same crime, while those aged between 15 and 17 can be sentenced to up to half the time. Anyone under the age of 12 is considered a child and therefore not liable for any crime they commit.

Nangarhar police head of media, Hazrat Hussain Mashraqiwal, said officers had captured seized children fighting with the Taleban in the past, although his department had no exact figures.

"Previously we've captured a number of children who have either escaped from the insurgents or were on their way to join them," he said. "We've also captured armed children on the battlefield."

Officials from the eastern branch of Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), said they were also aware of cases of children fighting with the Taleban.

"We are very concerned about the presence of children in armed groups," said Ghulam Hussain Bewas, head of the AIHRC's juvenile department, although he said that the organisation had not yet carried out any specific investigation into the matter.

Although the Taleban depict their fight as a religious war, imams argue that there is no excuse for recruiting children for the battlefield.

Fazlullah Mumtaz, a religious scholar, explained Islamic law regarding the use of child soldiers.

"According to Islamic teachings, any group that sends children to war is committing a crime," he said. "The rights and lives of children must not be threatened."

Attempts to obtain a statement from a Taleban official were unsuccessful. However, the group issued a statement last year denying that they had ever used child soldiers.

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