

Afghanistan: Insurgents Prey on Teenage Boys

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The Taliban and other groups find it easy to exploit vulnerable minors

Insurgent groups continue to use radical propaganda and exploit local poverty to recruit teenage boys to their ranks, according to speakers at an IWPR debate in Paktika.

“Due to government negligence, poverty, poor levels of education and propaganda, many young children are among the insurgents,” said Saif-ul-Rahman Shahab, head of Paktika’s Independent Journalists Association. “Children join the armed groups after they watch videos clips and other propaganda prepared by insurgents to brainwash children.

He told the event, held in the provincial capital Sharan on July 24 and attended by some 100 men and women, that the Taliban and others found it easy to exploit children’s innocence.

“Children can’t think critically and their minds are impressionable, so they soon start believing the ideology pushed by the insurgents and secretly approach these groups without informing their families. This means that the insurgents find it easy to recruit them to their armed groups.”

Shahab also noted that state security forces did not always carefully vet their young recruit to ensure they were over 18.

“Many boys aged under 18 are still seen in the military and security departments of Paktika province, especially in the national and local police forces,” he said.

Deen Ahmad, director of the rights office at Paktika police headquarters, acknowledged that sometimes underage boys were allowed to join the police force. However, he said efforts were underway to properly control recruitment.

“According to the findings of a commission appointed by presidential order, this year about 20 police officers were found to be under 18 and were dismissed,” he said.

Ghulam-ul-Rahman Hamdard, the local director of the department of labour, social affairs, martyred and the disabled, agreed with Shahab’s assessment that children’s vulnerability to Islamist propaganda was exacerbated by poverty and low levels of education.

Adding that an individual’s age was often incorrectly recorded on his or her tazkira, or identity card, Hamdard continued, “We are working together with UNICEF to stop and prevent the recruitment of children to the police forces, as well as to the armed insurgents.”

He also noted that sexual abuse was also a problem, especially among the insurgents.

“Children are used for bacha bazi [a practice in which young boys are made to dance at private parties, after which they are often sexually abused] by groups of insurgents, a major, unforgiveable crime according to both Islam and the constitution of Afghanistan.”

Hamdard continued, “These acts are often seen in remote areas under the control of the armed insurgent groups. The Afghan government should make all possible efforts to prevent such acts and encourage children to get an education by assuring the conditions in which they can study.”

Paktika deputy governor Attaullah Fazli acknowledged that some underage boys were serving in the police forces, adding that it was very hard to control military recruitment procedures in such a large province.

However, he said that the numbers of minors in the police force had been cut dramatically, whereas “the recruitment of young children to the insurgent forces is a very common practice.

“In fact, in many cases, the insurgents use young children as weapons of war and encourage them to carry out suicide attacks or plant bombs on the roads and highways”.

Fazli said that “religious scholars, tribal elders and civil society organisations” needed to work together with government actors to put an end to such recruitment.

Debate participant Nadia Yousufkhel said that families also needed to take responsibility for the direction boys and young men took in life.

“If mothers don’t take care of their children or educate them properly, their children go on to join the armed insurgent groups,” she said.

Location: Afghanistan

Topic: Police

Child soldiers

Focus: Promoting Human Rights and Good Governance in
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