

Afghanistan: Oct/Nov '10 Part II

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New medical facilities and accommodation provided at Balkh prison after report on prisoner hunger strike.

Government and prison officials say an IWPR report on dire conditions in Balkh jail have spurred them into launching a wide-ranging series of improvements (See: **Hunger Strike Over Afghan Jail Conditions**).

Prison inmates had staged a number of hunger strikes in protest at overcrowding and insanitary conditions – there are just eight toilets for some 700 prisoners and outbreaks of disease are common.

General Dawlat Mohammad Aziz, the director of Balkh prison, said that it was IWPR's story which had paved the way for significant improvements to the prison. He noted that while some media outlets reported on the prisoners' recent hunger strike, only IWPR had investigated the issues behind the action.

Following publication of the IWPR report, the ministry of public health built a four-bed clinic inside the jail staffed by two doctors, and is considering the possibility of creating a dedicated ward for sick inmates in the local civilian hospital.

To ease overcrowding, the justice ministry funded an expansion of the jail and set up a kindergarten to cater for some 18 children who live with the 40 women inmates. Literacy classes have been started and a prison library opened with hundreds of books.

Aziz said that foreign institutions including the International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, and the local Provincial Reconstruction Team, PRT, had also visited the jail and offered to help improve conditions there.

Dr Noor Oghli, spokesman for the public health ministry, said that he had read the IWPR report with interest when it appeared last month.

"I personally discussed the problems of the prisoners in Balkh prison with the officials of the ministry of public health," he said. "We set up a clinic inside the prison immediately to address their health problems.

"Publication of the report not only helped the prisoners in Balkh but meant we also sent delegations to other prisons, and we will create such clinics in ten other provinces in the near future."

Oghli said that he read national and international news reports on a daily basis, but those of IWPR were particularly comprehensive and reflected the reality on the ground.

Adding that international media coverage was vital to keep government officials abreast of areas of concern, he urged IWPR to continue publishing such reports so that further problems could be addressed.

Abdul Khaleq, a prisoner at the jail, said that he clearly remembered the visit of the IWPR reporter, who told them that the entire world, including government officials, would be able to read his report after it was published on the IWPR website.

"Some changes have appeared now after one-and-a-half months and I think that the report affected the situation, because many domestic reporters came here in the past but no changes appeared," he said.

Khaleq said that overcrowding had been eased and medical provision improved, although he added that more still needed to be done.

Location: [Afghanistan](#)

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