

Children Suffer in School Funding Lottery

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The majority of Afghan school children are being taught in dangerous, war-ravaged buildings.

In a windowless room with a damaged roof, the pupils in class 12A at Gulam Haidar Khan School sit cross-legged on the cold, dusty ground and painstakingly write notes taken from their shared books.

Years of war have left the ceilings and walls blackened with soot and grime. A broken water tap hangs uselessly from the wall.

Plastic sheeting over the window frames keeps out the light but not the cold, and shoppers in the nearby Bibi Maryam bazaar can peer through and disturb the children. Where there are no spaces in the classrooms, lessons are held in corridors or outside in the yard.

More than 4,500 boys aged between five and 16 are registered at the school - which was reopened this spring after years of use as a refugee center. Named after a hero of the Anglo-Afghan wars, it also provides education for around 400 schoolgirls who are taught separately.

Principal Abdul Hakim Kohdamani reels off a list of his school's shortcomings. "Beside lack of drinking water there are few windows, no doors, no working toilets and we need at least 2,000 tables and chairs," he said.

There is also no electricity, which is a particular problem for the 1,361 night school students from government offices who move in between 4pm and 7pm for vocational training.

Yet for all its problems, the education ministry ranks the school's curriculum and management as being the second best in the city.

The facilities contrast sharply to those available to the 3,800 pupils of the Lycee Esteqlal in downtown Kabul. In January, its buildings were beautifully restored in a programme overseen by the UN cultural and education agency UNESCO and the French technical support NGO ACTED.

Classrooms are well-equipped and there are plenty of books and teaching materials - all paid for by a direct grant from the French government.

Principal Mohammad Wali Gulbahari recognises that his school is not only privileged but is also an exception. He believes the donor nations have failed to coordinate aid to the country's schools and, like an increasing number of public sector workers here, he blames NGOs for spending a "disproportionate" amount of funds on administration, accommodation and salaries for its foreign staff.

"The donor nations have given them funds without checking the expenses of these organisations," he said. "They should consider allocating separate funds for these costs."

Deputy education minister Mohammad Moeen Marastyal accuses donor countries of failing to support his ministry and wants funds to be paid directly instead of through the NGOs. He says that the present

situation has resulted in significant disparities within the education system, with some schools denied vital resources while others flourish.

Privately, the donor nations have said that they are not willing to fund the current regime as a new one is soon to be elected by the Loya Jirga, though they accept that NGO sector coordination is a problem.

"The problem is that NGOs only deliver where they can operate, not where they are needed," said one western official.

The government, meanwhile, is dependent on western donations because it is unable to raise funds through taxation. But the latter isn't enough to restore the country's damaged schools. Marastyal said he has only received 320,000 US dollars from the United Arab Emirates, which was divided equally between the country's 32 provinces.

"That's not enough," he complained. "You couldn't even buy carpets for that."

Whoever is to blame, the gulf in resources between the supported and unsupported schools is a remarkable one.

In Kabul's Khaikhana district on the other side of town, Abdul Ghafoor Nadeem School caters for around 3,800 children. Unlike the Lycee Istiqlal, it is housed in a war-ravaged, decrepit and dangerous building.

"The classrooms are held together with raw bricks and bamboo," said principal Jalaludin Hashemi.

"There is the constant danger that bits of the ceiling will fall on the children, who have to sit on the muddy floors. There is no drinking water and no glass in the windows. The children cannot use the toilets because there are no doors on the stalls."

Over in the Shah Shaheed quarter of Kabul, by the city's Itifaq Mosque, sits Amena-e- Fidawi, one of the city's oldest girls' schools. A strategic target for warring militias in 1991, its shattered frame is home not only to new students from Amena-e- Fidawi school but also pupils from the former Bibi Shamsu school, who are temporarily billeted with them.

Hanifa Ihsan, Bibi Shamsu's principal, is as keen to move her students out of Amena-e-Fidawi as their over-stretched and under-resourced hosts are to see them go. Ihsan has asked the government for a tent that she can put in the yard until a suitable building is found for her students.

But neither tent nor new home is expected soon and sixth grade student Haseebullah Abdulsaboor said, "All we do is wait and wish for a time when we will be sitting on a chair, writing at a desk and have a playground for skipping and football."

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