

Education Boost

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The authorities believe they have come up with a strategy for revitalising Afghanistan's ailing education sector.

The Afghan government has unveiled ambitious plans to revolutionise the crumbling schools system, but teachers and pupils have little reason to believe the programme will succeed.

A school rebuilding programme, a review of teachers' pay and more education for girls are part of a massive 350-project plan - which will cost up to a billion US dollars - revealed by Education Minister Mohammad Yonus Qanunee.

Qanunee, a former intelligence aide to the murdered Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massood, outlined his plans to international organisations, government officials and embassy representatives at a conference in Kabul's Intercontinental Hotel this week.

Earlier, he told more than a thousand teachers and ministry officials gathered in a school hall in the city that the ministry of education had finally come up with a successful strategy after years of the failed policies.

"Aid organisations will implement these projects and will also be responsible for their budgets," he said.

Under the plans, teachers would have access to housing, be paid on time, and be given vouchers to help with food and transport costs. As well as an increase in the number of girls' schools, vital equipment such as chairs, books and stationery will be provided for all students.

The announcement comes as problems in the hard-pressed education sector mount, with morale amongst students and teachers at rock-bottom.

Just three km from the education ministry in central Kabul, 17-year-old Mohammad Shakib is struggling with his studies at Ghazee High School. "Our school has countless problems," he told IWPR.

"There are 67 students in our class and we have to study in a cramped tent, which has room for only 15 people. Most of us are studying in the yard under the hot sun.

"I have been given only three books and have bought 14 more in the bazaar with my own money. If this is the situation in schools in the capital I wonder what's going on in the provinces. I cannot believe in this new scheme until I see it working."

Teachers in the provinces have been facing such hardships that many have decided to leave the profession altogether. "We have lost patience with the authorities," said Fazil Rehman, principle of the Narkh High School in Wardak province 25 km west of Kabul.

Muhebullah, a teacher at the capital's Speen Keli High School, told IWPR that he doesn't earn enough to

live on. "They say that they are working for education of Afghanistan, but if we compare with the past, you can not see any changes in teachers' lives," he said.

"A teacher is paid 1,800,000 Afghanis a month - around 45 dollars. The salaries are not paid on time and it is not even worth mentioning the health problems. Our teachers have a very tough life."

Some educationalists question whether the new plans will be properly funded.

Nargeesa, a teacher at Fatima-tul-Zehra school in Wardak, is suspicious of what happens to foreign aid money. "I don't believe the officials spend the cash properly. Most of it is going in private pockets for their own purposes," she said.

Qanunee has rejected such claims, and announced that the education ministry's accounts will to be thrown open to public scrutiny so that teachers and officials could see where the money was being spent.

Mohammad Moheen Marastyal, an education ministry official, defends the department's record. "I accept that the we have lots of problems, but we have done lots of important things too," he said.

More than 7,500 schools were destroyed during the years of conflict. There are only 65,000 teachers for three million students - another 1.5 million want to go to school but are being denied by a lack of staff and facilities.

Ministry officials and students will go on a charm offensive as far afield as Saudi Arabia, the United States and Europe drumming up financial support for the new projects.

Lakhdar Brihimi, special envoy of the UN General Secretary, was in Kabul to hear the new plans. "We are ready to take an active part in solving problems of the education ministry, but at the moment providing one billion dollars is looking a difficult job. We will take part according to our ability," he said.

And UNESCO representative Lutfullah Safi pointed out that they have already done a lot of work for Afghan schools. "We have helped in many different sectors. We've provided chairs, desks and stationery, paid for seminars, held courses and so on," he said.

"It is possible that UNESCO will help the education ministry in construction and building affairs in the future."

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