

Girls' Schools Become Targets

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Conservative Islamists opposed to women's education stage a string of attacks across the country.

Twelve-year-old Hafizullah was surprised to see a soup pot perched on the wall that divides Afshar school in west Kabul from the home of a local family. Stranger still, a wire was dangling from the pot.

"I told the schoolboy not to touch it," said school caretaker Mohammed Omar. "'It's dangerous', I said. 'Tell the school principal what's happening here.'"

The police soon arrived, along with members of the Afghan national intelligence service.

The boy and the caretaker had found a bomb, primed to explode that morning when hundreds of girls would be in class.

Their discovery helped the authorities avert what would have been the most devastating attack on Afghan schoolgirls since the fall of the Taleban.

"The explosives in the pot were the size of a piece of soap," said Sayed Alim, head of the police department in the fifth district of Kabul. "And there was another element which had four batteries. The bomb had a timer and was set to explode at 9 am."

About 1,000 children attend the school daily - girls in the morning, boys in the afternoon. "All the students in the school at the time [of the blast] would have been either killed or injured - and the houses nearby would also have been damaged," said Alim.

The attempted bombing on May 31 is just the latest in a string of incidents across Afghanistan targeting schools offering an education to girls. Yet in more than three years, police have failed to arrest a single person or to provide any effective security.

Edward Carwardine, a press spokesman for the United Nations Children's Education Fund, Unicef, said the attempted blast in Kabul marked a serious change in strategy compared to previous attacks.

"The consequences would have been unimaginable," he said.

The exact number of attacks on schools is unclear. The government says that 10 girls' schools have been attacked in the past just two and a half years. Unicef says it has

confirmed 26 attacks - most of which were against girls schools.

But earlier this month, Toor Khan, the chief of police based in the Shah Joi district of Zabul province - a Taleban stronghold - reported that between 30 and 40 intermediate and high schools for boys and girls there had been forced to shut down.

Toor Khan said that 20 of the schools had been completely destroyed by fire and the remaining ones had been severely damaged. He said the closures left 3,000 children without schools to attend.

The police chief also said that village elders last week met with two Taleban

commanders - Mullah Rozi Khan and Mullah Mohammed Alim - in the Arghandab district of Kandahar province, where they were told that children should be engaging in jihad, or holy war, rather than studying.

Unicef officials said they are investigating the reports from Zabul, but are unable to confirm them, and cited government officials in the province as saying the reports from Shah Joi were "incorrect".

Carwardine stressed that his organisation knew of no school that had been completely destroyed and pointed out that the number of schools targeted was just a small percentage of the 7,000 schools in the country.

Officials with the education ministry would not comment on the reports from Zabul.

Sayed Norullah Murad, who is in charge of relations with non-governmental organisations in the education ministry, said it is not clear who is behind the attacks.

Attacks on schools have occurred in the northern provinces of Saripul, Badakhshan and Panjshir; the southern provinces of Paktia and Logar, and in Wardak, Oruzgan, Kandahar and Zabul further to the west.

Many people appear afraid to name those they think are responsible.

But both government officials and local people blame religious conservatives either acting on their own initiative or as part of a group such as the Taleban or the ultra-religious Hizb-e-Islami.

The attacks have spread terror among students, leading some schoolgirls and their families to consider ending their education.

Ghulam Sakhi, 50, head of Afshar school, said that since the bomb was found, many children have been worried. "Students were afraid to come to school, but we have tried a lot to encourage them to come to classes," he said.

Khalida, 17, a student at the school, said that she and her family are nervous. "Ever since the police found the bomb at the school, if someone pushes hard at the school's door or windows, I think there will be a bomb explosion," she said.

While Khalida said she will continue to attend classes, her classmate Saleha, 18, said her family was still deciding whether it was safe for her to continue.

Last September, the Moghol Kil school, in the southern province of Logar, was attacked. The school, which operated out of tents, accommodated 590 girls and 750 boys.

The attackers were specific in their target, burning down only the tents used by girls.

Only the petrol canisters used to start the fire and the ashes of the former classrooms remained.

The school's staff has been trying to encourage girls to stay at the school but said that many children remain afraid.

"When I came to school and saw the ashes of the burnt tent, I really lost interest in studying," said Farida, 11. "But then my mother sent me back to school."

"Since the tents were burnt down, 11 girls from the third grade have stopped coming to school," said Haji Masto Khan, a teacher.

Parents are equally concerned. "My daughter Sameena was crying when she came home on the day that the criminals burnt the school tents," said Abdul Munir. "She said, 'We don't want to go to school any more because they want to kill us too.'"

Parents of students at the Logar school have got together to help protect it. "Local people have recruited three people to protect the school and if the government will not pay them, we will pay them ourselves," said Munir.

The school attacks are part of a wider debate about the role of women in society and their need for education.

In the Mohammad Agha district of Logar, where the Moghol Khil school is based, the local mullah, Mir Wais, 27, holds conservative views.

"For girls, it is enough if they learn the alphabet," he said. "They don't need more education [than that]. They should study in the mosques, to learn how to pray."

He then quoted an ancient Afghan proverb, "Woman - either in the home or in the tomb."

Mir Wais denied knowing who might be behind the attacks.

But not all Islamic teachers agree that women should forgo an education. Mullah Shaikhzada, a liberal who works in the Deh Sabz district, north of Kabul, said that the people attacking schools are "criminals", adding, "they are giving Islam a bad name. These people are not mujahedin. . . They are guilty of killing innocent people, so this action is against Sharia law."

Given the failure of local police to make any arrests in the cases, school officials have requested support from the education ministry - which in turn said it had asked the interior ministry for additional security.

Murad insisted that two requests for additional security were made to the interior ministry, the first in late April. IWPR has seen copies of both the official letters that education ministry officials insist were sent. But Lutfollah Mashal, a spokesman for the interior ministry, said none were received.

But Lutfollah Mashal, spokesman of the interior ministry, says that the ministry of education has not lodged any request for help.

Mashal blames Hizb-e-Islami, the Taleban and al-Qaeda for the attacks, but admits that no one had been

arrested.

Asked why, Mashal said that, "Our police are not well-equipped because we don't have radios, cars and other necessary things."

He also noted that there are currently only 18,000 officers in the force assigned to protect the whole country.

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