

## **Grave Abuse Alleged at Kabul Juvenile Centre**

**Author:** [Mina Habib](#)

On the television news one night I saw the story of a 17-year-old boy called Masud who had been killed while in a juvenile detention centre in Kabul.

The incident raised dozens of questions in my mind. I asked myself how such an incident could possibly happen in a centre where the children are supposed to be protected under close supervision by officials and the police. There must be many things about this story that have been left unsaid, I thought.

When I went into the office the next day, I shared the matter with the IWPR editor and he encouraged me to pursue it. I hurried off to the juvenile detention centre.

However, when I got there, I soon found out that it would not be easy to work on this story, as obstacles were created for me even before I could pass through its gates.

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### **ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

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*The Story Behind the Story gives an insight into the work that goes into IWPR articles and the challenges faced by our trainees at every stage of the editorial process.*

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When I introduced myself to one of the policemen there as a journalist, he started laughing and said, "Get out of here. Many journalists have come here but none of them was able to get in."

I realised that I would have to be very patient and would need to approach the ministry of justice, which controls all the prisons.

In Afghanistan, journalists face many obstacles created by government officials, because they do not necessarily want to give information to the media which they fear will undermine their own work.

So they try to deter journalists from writing stories by wearing them down with different excuses such as "the head of the office is in a meeting (or is ill, or is gone abroad) so try again tomorrow (or the day after, or next week)".

But I was determined not to give up on this story. After four days of traveling to the ministry of justice and waiting for long hours for meetings with officials there, and facing new excuses every day, I was finally able to obtain permission to carry out interviews inside the juvenile detention centre.

I rushed off to the centre as soon as I had this order, but I still had to wait outside the gate for at least an hour after the policeman stationed there told me, "Let me ask inside and see whether the director is available or gives permission to let you in."

When I was finally allowed inside, I went straight to the office of the director, Aziza Adalatkhwah.

However, when she saw me, she told me immediately that she both refused to let me see the children or to give me an interview herself, and asked me to leave.

It was only after I told her that I would go back to the ministry if she refused to give information that she relented and told me I could come back tomorrow.

"You can visit the children provided that you do not interview them or take pictures," she said.

The next day, Adalatkhwah accompanied me into the centre, and told me I could only ask them questions about their schoolwork.

We went into a classroom where boys studied and Adalatkhwah stuck to me like my own shadow. The children seemed scared when they saw her. When at some point Adalatkhwah was distracted and moved away from me, I immediately asked one of the boys about Masud's death.

"Older boys here use others for sexual purposes," he whispered hurriedly. "Masud was killed for this reason. We do not have good food or good accommodation and we are beaten. Do something about us, for God's sake."

Another kid sitting next to him confirmed this and added, "Some random people come here and abuse the children. They fight here every day."

Adalatkhwah then accompanied me to the girls' block, where they told me that they had been excluded from the presidential pardon list, and had to wait for long periods of time for action on their cases.

Afterwards, I went to Adalatkhwah's office with her, where she acknowledged that some inmates were over 18 years of age - but had powerful relatives who had managed to get them admitted to the juvenile detention centre so as to serve shorter sentences.

"We cannot refuse them," she said, while trying to persuade me not to publish the story.

Regarding Masud's death, she said, "I was in India and I do not have much information about this incident."

When I came out of her office, a policeman standing there asked me, "Did you get anything?"

I replied that I hadn't managed to get much information.

"I witnessed the incident," he told me. "I saw two boys fighting with Masud, but I was not allowed to enter the centre. Therefore, nobody helped Masud. They crushed his head against the wall."

He also gave me the address of Masud's family home.

In order to find out more about the juvenile detention centre, I returned the next day as it was visitors' day when families were allowed to see the children.

When I arrived, I saw a young man, who had come to visit his younger brother, and asked him to get some information from his brother about the centre for me. I waited by the gate for three hours until he returned, but when I started talking to him a policeman came up to us and said, "What are you talking about? Get out of here and do not stay out here anymore."

So I sat in a taxi with him, and he told me, "My brother said that moral corruption (sexual immorality) is massive there. Older boys force themselves on the younger boys for sexual purposes. They do not have good food; they are beaten up by the officials; they do not have any leisure areas; and they don't have medicine or good doctors."

He said he was concerned about his brother's health.

The following day, I set out for the house of Masud's family, in Rishkhor, an area about 20 kilometres away from central Kabul.

When I told taxi drivers that I wanted to go there, they would take a close look at me and say, "I do not think it is good for you to go there."

When I finally found a taxi willing to take me, the driver asked about my business there and I explained the story to him.

"I wish you were a representative of people in the parliament, because you are very sympathetic," he replied. "You are very courageous so I will go with you there as well."

After driving through many twisting alleys, I arrived in Masud's house. His family members were still mourning his death, and his father invited me inside. When they realised that I was a journalist, the family sat around me and Masud's mother, father and sister said they had many, many things to tell.

Weeping, Masud's father Khalil guided me to his late son's room and showed his pictures to me.

"He would complain about the inattention of the officials of the centre and about moral corruption there each time we visited him," Khalil said, adding that he had tried to stop some of the boys from carrying out abuse and had fought with them on several occasions.

"The centre officials did not pay attention to the problem until my son was killed," he continued, adding that his son had been arrested on false accusations of robbery. Despite a lack of evidence, the boy was imprisoned, he claimed.

"My son was killed despite being innocent," Khalil said repeatedly. "The government must punish the perpetrators."

When I left the house, many of the family's neighbours approached me and said that Masud was a good boy and not guilty of the crimes he had been accused of.

One of the kids started crying and told me, "Masud was our teacher in the English language course. He was a very well behaved and good person."

I wanted to include the opinion of ministry of justice officials regarding Masud's murder, but when I went there, I heard all the old excuses repeated over and over again - "the deputy minister is not present, the

minister is tired, he just arrived from a trip," and so on.

When I approached to the ministry spokesman, Farid Najibi, he said, "I do not have any information in this regard."

The next day, I went to the head of criminal investigation in the ministry of interior affairs, Mohammad Zaher, who was very angry about the incident.

"The centre has changed into a centre of moral corruption," he said. "Officials of the centre must be investigated seriously, otherwise, the number of such incidents will increase."

He accused those running the centre of a lack of professionalism, adding, "When the centre was the responsibility of the police, we would always search the children's cells and monitor all their movements."

I managed to complete the report, even though I felt some elements were left out due to a lack of cooperation from officials.

Still, I am happy that I was able to do my job - looking into the murder of an innocent child and highlighting the problems of the juvenile detention centre, so they will at least have to take some measures to address the problems there.

**Location:** Afghanistan

**Topic:** Children

**Focus:** Story Behind the Story

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