

Harsh Lessons at Balkh University

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Students at Afghanistan's second-largest campus are struggling with outdated materials, poor facilities and substandard lodgings.

During the day, the students struggle to learn from outdated textbooks, many of them written in Russian. After their studies, they go home to a rundown hostel, which has poor toilet facilities, an on-off power supply and drinking water that has left many of the undergraduates with diarrhoea.

It's not easy to learn at the University of Balkh - yet somehow 4,000 students excel here, making the campus at Mazar-e-Sharif, some 300 km north-west of Kabul, the second-largest of the country's eight universities.

Only Kabul university boasts more students than Balkh, which has faculties in medicine, engineering, economics, journalism, literature, law and science.

Medical student Zabihullah is quick to point out the problems he faces. "The study materials have no modern or relevant information in them. We don't have laboratories so our lessons are all theoretical, and most of our books are written in Russian," he told IWPR.

"When we want to do additional studies on a subject, we are unable to find any books in our own language and this is a big problem for us."

Conditions are not much better over at the students' hostel. Enayatullah, a third year engineering student, described the facilities as very poor. "The electricity and water systems in the hostel are in a bad condition," he said.

"Water is available for only two hours a day. The toilets cannot be used at any other time and there is a very bad smell in the corridors. Most of the students are suffering from diarrhoea and we do not have any proper drinking water or bathing facilities.

"The authorities have not paid any attention to these problems as yet."

Balkh university president Professor Habibullah admits there are problems with the hostel. "This year we admitted a large number of students, most of whom are from different provinces, and they all need a place to stay," he told IWPR.

"The fact is we have too many students for the number of rooms -12 in a room that is designed for four - and we don't have anywhere to build another block. The hostel in which the students are staying at the moment has not been repaired since it was built in 1986.

"The electricity and water systems have been destroyed and the rooms do not have cupboards, mirrors, dishes and other necessary equipment. The students are having a very tough life there."

However, help is at hand from the Focus Organisation, an educational non-governmental organisation, which is due to carry out repairs to the campus' classrooms and kitchens.

Habibullah is also celebrating the delivery of nearly 2,000 books from the ACBAR Organisation, Kabul University, a Korean organisation and the government of Iran, which he hopes will solve the language issue.

"It is a fact that most of our studying materials are Russian and our students cannot easily take advantage of them. Fortunately, we recently got some books which will make life a lot easier for the students," he said.

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