

Neighbourhood Watch for Afghan Schools

Author: [Sayed Yaqub Ibrahimi](#)

Unable to combat the rash of arson attacks across the country, the government enlists the public's help to safeguard schools and children.

Mohammad Gul used to dream of becoming a teacher. The 13-year-old went to a high school in Maarja district, in the troubled southern province of Helmand, where he worked hard to get good grades so that he would be able to go to university.

That was before his school burned down last year - torched by insurgents seeking to undermine the provincial authorities.

"I don't think I will fulfil my dream," Mohammad Gul told IWPR. "If the government rebuilds the school, the Taleban will just burn it down again. That's how we all feel. The government has provided tents for the school, but we are afraid that we will be burned along with the tents."

Mohammad Gul is just one of thousands of children whose futures are being jeopardised by the rising tide of attacks on schools in Afghanistan.

Over the past year, more than 100 schools have been burned down. This threatens to reverse one of the key achievements of President Hamed Karzai's administration.

Throughout the country, but especially in the southern provinces, schools that opened to great fanfare after the fall of the Taleban are being quietly closed because parents and pupils fear retribution from armed insurgents.

Most people blame the Taleban, citing the fundamentalists' opposition to secular schooling, especially for girls. In statements made by various spokesmen, the Taleban have denied carrying out these attacks,

Whoever is torching the schools, it is having a widespread negative impact on education for a new generation of Afghans. Accurate statistics are hard to come by, but most experts estimate that no more than half of all school-age children are currently enrolled.

Afghan security forces have been overwhelmed by the problem, and the government freely admits that it lacks the capacity to protect all its schools.

"There is a limited number of police," said interior ministry spokesman Zalmai Bashiri. "So now civilians are helping the police protect their schools."

Bashiri was referring to the Education Protection Commissions - groups set up by the government to mobilise communities to defend their own schools.

Mohammad Seddiq Patman, the deputy minister of education, told IWPR the commissions were designed jointly by his ministry, the Afghan defence and interior ministries, and the National Security Department.

Each district will have a central commission staffed by the district government chief, the local security commander, the director of education, a cleric and a village elder.

Then there will be sub-commissions at lower levels, recruiting members from the local community. Residents of villages or school catchment areas will choose representatives to guard the schools at night, which is when most attacks take place. In the event of an attack, they will alert local residents by sounding an alarm or by phone.

According to Patman, the problem in the past was that there was no coordination with local people. Residents expected the security forces to protect them, so they did not assume responsibility for their schools.

Now, since the central authorities are unable to keep the schools safe, local people will have to do it on their own.

Patman said that the new programme was already bearing fruit.

"We've seen fewer attacks in the past few months," he said. "Even when there are attempts, local people prevent the attacks by cooperating with the local authorities."

In one such incident in Helmand last month, the commission's guards alerted villagers when insurgents tried to burn down a school.

"They all rushed to the scene, and not only prevented the fire but captured the attackers as well," said Patman.

Local residents contribute either labour or money. If they cannot take their turn guarding their school, they provide funding to pay those who do. Most schools will have two or three people on guard.

Nazar Mohammad, a resident of Chamtal district in Balkh province, in the north of Afghanistan, agreed that the scheme was working.

"Over the past year, several of our schools had been set on fire," he told IWPR. "We were all afraid that our children would get hurt."

Now that the villagers themselves are providing the security, he said, parents can rest assured that even if an attack occurs, there will be someone around to prevent damage or injury.

"Three villagers are guarding the school which my children attend," he said. "We are working with them,

and we will help them if need be. We all have the phone number of the police, and if something happens we can contact them very easily.”

Religious leaders are taking a more spiritual approach. The best way to ensure security, they argue, is to change attitudes.

Maulawi Abdul Maqsood, an Islamic scholar in the Sayyad district of Sar-e-Pul province, also in the north, where several schools have been set on fire in the past few months, said he and his colleagues have begun a campaign of religious teaching to discourage people from taking part in attacks.

“During the years of war, the enemies of Afghanistan have told people that schools are the places of infidels, and they are using some impressionable young people to torch schools,” he told IWPR. “But we have to tell people that this is untrue.”

According to the Abdul Maqsood, clerics must use major gatherings such as weddings and prayer meetings to put their point across.

Ghulam Haidar Qanoon, the deputy director of education in Balkh, has toured most of the province’s education protection commissions and is optimistic that they will be a success.

“When the commissions were set up, people willingly appointed people to safeguard their schools, and they mounted cultural and religious propaganda campaigns in most of the villages,” he said. “They have even rebuilt some schools that were burned down, and these are now better than they were before.”

But some observers are sceptical. For one thing, the civilian guards are not given weapons.

“Nothing can be done empty-handed,” said Jan Mohammad Habibi, a newspaper editor in Balkh. “A few people sleeping in schools won’t have a chance against armed attackers. If the government really wants to stop the school burning, they must arm these guards legally.”

Patman, the interior ministry spokesman, said that if it proved necessary, his ministry would provide guards with weapons.

But in a heavily-armed society, many people have decided to take matters into their own hands.

“If I wait until the government arms me, nothing will ever happen,” said one guard in Charbolak district of Balkh province, who did not want to be named. “I have weapons at home, and I take a gun with me when I guard the school at night. I’m now confident that I can protect both myself and the school.”

This man added that he knew of many other districts where villagers were doing the same.

“If the government had told us earlier that they weren’t able to protect the schools, we would already have

taken steps and the schools wouldn't have been burned down," he insisted. "We know what to do."

Sayed Yaqub Ibrahimy is an IWPR reporter in Mazar-e-Sharif.

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