

Nomads Head for School

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Denied education for two decades, the country's nomadic tribes are hungry to learn.

Ten-year-old Anar Gul watches with longing as other children troop off to school. "The students are wearing clean clothes and going to class," Anar said, trailing behind his parents and other nomad families on their way from Paghman to Kabul. "I wish I could go with them."

His eight-year-old brother, Soor, feels the same. "But there is no school for us because we never stay in one place for more than a month," he said.

An entire generation of nomads in Afghanistan has gone without any schooling. Now, though, Anar and Soor may get their wish, because the Karzai government has agreed to provide them mobile classrooms.

Before the Soviet invasion, former Afghan president Daud Khan created 40 such schools. But during the last 23 years of war, they were destroyed, making education for the community impossible.

The nomads, most of whom are Pashtun, live in tents and migrate seasonally. According to United Nations statistics, the ethnic group comprises 170,000 families; other estimates range from 600,000 to three million.

The Afghan wars have severely affected them. Many saw their flocks of sheep cut to pieces by minefields. The recent years of drought exacerbated their problems, with some forced to sell off livestock simply to survive.

The nomads saw the recent Loya Jirga as an opportunity to get the authorities to improve their lot. In the run-up to the conference, they had feared that they would be underrepresented because of the conflicting estimates over their number.

High on the list of nomad demands was a government commitment to provide education for their community. Officials agreed to do so and consulted the various nomad tribes, with most favouring the mobile school option.

Mohammad Omar, deputy minister of tribes and borders, told IWPR, "The nomadic life of these people deprived their children of an education. Past governments had made mobile schools available, but the nomads were not interested in education. Now they are."

Sher Khan Kochai, leader of the tribe of nomads in Gardez, said the community regards education as vital if they are to progress. He insists that they always approved of it and, but for the Daud Kahn period, were unhappy that it wasn't available.

"We are also residents of this country and we also have taken part in the defense of our country, so it is our right that the government provide us the facilities that it has provided others," Kochai said. "We are not holding any official posts, but if we gain education, we will be able to gain our rights."

Meltan Khan, a member of the primary school department at the education ministry,

told IWPR that the government wants to ensure that the mobile schools have everything they need - that teachers are paid and students have textbooks. With a proper education, he said, "nomads will be able to live like their compatriots and will be able to inform everyone about their culture and way of life."

Abdul Rahim Tarakhel, a nomad who lives in Khak- e -Jabar, agrees that education is essential for his people. He has 22 grandchildren, and he's "very worried" that none of them have been to school. " If we get these schools then I'll send my grandchildren there because I think it will help them learn the difference between good and bad," said the 70-year-old.

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