

School Attendance Plummetts in Helmand

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Compared with just one year ago, the number of children recorded as going to school is tiny. Official figures suggest that Helmand province has suffered a massive drop in the number of children going to school in the last year, as a direct consequence of Taleban attacks targeting the education system.

People living in this southern province say the lack of educational opportunities is itself creating potential recruits for the insurgency.

Of all Afghan provinces, Helmand has been worst hit in recent years by the enforced closure of schools, either through Taleban intimidation or by the simple tactic of setting them on fire.

Rahimullah Khan, who heads Helmand's education department, told IWPR that a few months ago, only 35,000 pupils were attending school, but that things had improved somewhat since then. .

"The number of pupils in Helmand province has recently reached 54,000. More than 10 schools, previously closed down by the Taleban, have been re-opened in the Nawa district [alone] recently," he said.

Even this improvement amounts to a massive fall in attendance from February last year, when the then provincial education chief said there were 111,000 pupils registered in Helmand, of whom 12,000 were girls. At that point in February 2007, there were 113 schools operating across the province, the rest of the 224 schools had already closed. (See [Schools Face Murderous Challenge](#), ARR No. 241, 9-Feb-07.)

This is at a time when education provision is growing in more secure parts of Afghanistan.

Students and teachers in Helmand say the official figures are far too optimistic. Whatever the correct number, though, it is clear that huge numbers of children are missing out on education in the province. Without schooling, young men will be ill equipped to cope in a situation of high unemployment, and that could make them ripe recruits for the Taleban.

Grishk district in the north of Helmand is one of many areas where the Taleban are active.

According to local schoolteacher Haji Abdul Hamid, "In past years, there were 23 schools operating in Grishk, but since 2006, it's fallen to just six. The number of pupils attending school reached 13,088 in past years, 3,500 of them girls. Almost all the boys and girls are now unable to go to school and are at home. Only a tiny number in the town of Grishk itself are currently going to school."

Taj Mohammed, deputy head of education in Helmand, detailed how many closures there have been, "There were 241 schools across Helmand province, of which 34 have been closed in the past four years. More than 64 schools have been torched by unidentified men, and 17 teachers and students have been

murdered by anti-government militants."

The Taleban send mixed messages about whether they deliberately target schools, since they insist they are in favour of education in general.

The movement claimed responsibility for burning and closing down some schools in 2006, but have not said anything about the issue since then.

Last year, Taleban spokesman Qari Yusuf Ahmadi told reporters, "We have burnt some schools where anti-Islamic lessons were being taught. I can recall a school in the Shajoi district of Zabul province where the students were being taught wrongly."

He said the Taleban disapproved of changes to the way literacy was being taught, although he did not make it clear whether this counted as sufficient grounds to attack a school.

"Many changes have been made to the textbooks in other schools. For instance, the letter A used to be for Allah but in these textbooks A is used for 'anar' [pomegranate]. J used to be for Jihad, but these books have J for 'jowar' [maize]. We do not permit such changes," he said.

The Afghan authorities say Muslim religious scholars are free to check the curriculum to ensure there is nothing that runs counter to Islam – and say unless they find anything wrong, then the Taleban claim is merely a pretext for stopping children from getting an education.

On the ground, people in rural areas describe a policy of clear intimidation.

"We have gone to the Taleban many times and told them not to take action against the schools and they agreed to this," said Alisha Mazlumyar, a tribal elder in the Marja district. "But few days after the schools start up, Taleban militants make death threats to teachers and pupils. The anti-government militants do not want education to improve in our society. There isn't a single school operating in Marja district. Our children have been prevented from attending school, and are at home."

Marja district, some 40 kilometres southwest of the provincial capital Lashkar Gah, has seen recurring violence, most recently with a firefight between Afghan government troops and the Taleban that lasted several hours on April 08.

"There is nothing here but insecurity and fighting," grumbled Mazlumyar.

Bashir Ahmad, 20, is currently in the final school year in Lashkar Gah, where he went after his school in Marja closed down. After staying at home and working on the family farm for six months, he made his a

decision on his own – “I should think about my future”.

"The Taleban are currently dominant in Marja district. I can't go home. They'd kill me because I'm studying in Lashkar Gah. My father has been threatened by the Taleban several times, who said he must stop me going to school. They said I was being taught anti-Islamic lessons in Lashkar Gah, although my father has never spoken to me about it."

Neighbouring Sangin district is suffering similar problems. It may be just 50 kilometres from Lashkar Gah, but the main town there is the only place fully controlled by Afghan government and NATO troops – the surrounding territory is de facto Taleban territory.

One teacher from Sangin, speaking on condition of anonymity, told IWPR, "I can't live in Sangin any more because I used to show the good path [teaching] to the children in this country.

"I fled to Lashkar Gah two years ago. I have done nothing wrong – all I was doing was teach in an Islamic school; teaching boys in a school. I cannot return to my home district."

As a result of the security problems, large numbers of school pupils are now in Lashkar Gah to attend schools in the relatively safe environment there. There is no dormitory provision, but the authorities are paying them each 12,000 afghanis, 240 US dollars, to cover a three-month period.

Analysts warn that if the lack of schooling in Helmand continues, the security situation is bound to get worst.

Helmand's new governor, Mohammad Gulab Mangal, says he has a three-point action plan to get the schools open again.

"I have three plans in hand to re-open the closed schools and am committed to implementing them," he told IWPR. "First, we want to get the weakened education system back on its feet with the help of tribal elders. Second, we want to destroy the enemy's capacity through military operations. And third, we will improve the capacity of the provincial education department so that the standard of teaching improves in all districts.

"We are currently in phase one of the plan. We hope to implement all of them soon."

Ghulam Sarwar Ghafari, an analyst in Helmand, said the role of the traditional tribal structure was crucial, "Villagers and elders in the districts should gather together and make plans for building private schools and hiring teachers. No one but the tribal elders can do this."

The argument is that private schools would be seen as distinct from the Afghan state and the Taleban would leave them alone. Although the education ministry would not be able to set the curriculum, it has agreed to make provision for school-leavers from private institutions to be admitted to university without

problems.

The problem may be that tribal leaders are not always in a position to rule on such matters these days.

As Haji Nadir Khan, an elder in Nawa district, said, "We see tribal elders getting killed every day. Several were killed brutally last month. So how do you think we can say something to benefit our villages and people? They [Taleban] view the tribal elders as major criminals, even though they [elders] find solutions for the problems facing villagers. They represent the people, not the government."

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