

School Closures Hit Afghan Province

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A lack of security in districts means that boys and girls can simply not learn.

Civil society activists are warning that the state school system in the southern province of Kandahar is in chaos, with some 50,000 children completely deprived of access to education.

Mohibulah Qadiri, director of Kandahar's education department, told IWPR, "Kandahar has 573 schools and 420 of these schools are currently active. But the remaining 153 are not functioning."

Kandahar, which shares a border with Pakistan, faces an ongoing insurgency and the lack of security has made life difficult for many residents, especially in more remote districts.

Qadiri said that all government schools had been shut down in the districts of Shorabak, Registan and Ghorak.

Some had been closed in other districts of Kandahar including Shah Wali Kot, Khakrez, Mya Neshin, Nesh, Maywand and Arghistan.

"Insecurity, a deficit of school buildings, a lack of teachers and the absence of cooperation and support from local people in some areas are the reasons many of these schools had to close," he continued.

For instance, Qadiri explained, some schools in the districts lacked adequate shelter for their students. Around 200 buildings needed to be constructed for these schools to function properly.

Better-off families in Kandahar have some recourse to the private school system. Bashir Ahmad Basharmal, head of the Private Schools Association, said that there were five private high schools, eight middle schools and 17 primary schools catering for some 18,000 students, including 4,000 girls.

But this was not an option for most people in the province, especially those living in more remote areas.

Social activist Fazal-ul-Bari Baryalai warned that depriving 50,000 children of education each year would have far-reaching consequences, not just on Kandahar but on the nation as a whole.

"Countries where educational centres are closed to prospective students can never develop," he said. "It's so disappointing to hear that 153 schools are closed in Kandahar province."

Abdul Wase Ghairatmal, head of the local branch of Nai - Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, agreed that it was shameful for so many children to be deprived of education in one of Afghanistan's largest provinces.

He claimed that corruption was partly to blame for the closures, with government funds diverted by local officials.

This has been a problem in other provinces such as Ghor, in central Afghanistan, where salaries have been routinely paid to absentee staff although schools remain closed.

(See also Afghanistan: **Ghor's Education System Near Collapse**).

Ghairatmal added, "Millions of Afghans are taken for these closed-down schools and there are people who then divide this huge amount of money among themselves."

However, Qadiri rejected any accusations of corruption within Kandahar's education department. He said that his department was working hard to reopen schools across all of Kandahar's districts so that all children could continue their education.

It was important to note that over 277,000 students were in school, he continued, including more than 67,000 girls.

As well as the 5,215 registered teachers currently employed by the department, including 713 women, Qadiri said that they had recruited another 2,000 teachers on a temporary basis to support local schools.

"Our priority is to reopen the closed schools and there has been no corruption - and will be no corruption - in the process," he said. "The teachers who teach are paid and the teachers at closed schools are not paid."

Others say that the problem is so severe that it needs direct intervention from central government.

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) has asked the government to address school closures in Kandahar.

Abdul Aziz Akrami, head of the AIHRC's regional press office, said that the government should prioritise reopening the schools because every child had the right to education.

Kandahar provincial council member Syed Ahmad Selab also said that he had raised the issue of Kandahar's education crisis with relevant officials in Kabul.

"I have repeatedly discussed the problems of Kandahar's schools with the ministry of education," he said. "They promised to solve these problems, but nothing happened and all the problems just remained as they were."

Samim Ikhplwak, the spokesman for Kandahar's governor, agreed with Selab that little action had been taken. He said that the governor had also raised the problems of Kandahar's schools with the ministry of education but to no avail.

In response, Kabir Haqmal, head of publications at the education ministry, said that provincial officials had unrealistic expectations of what central government could do.

"Just sharing problems with the ministry of education doesn't mean that they can be solved immediately. We are responsible for the whole country, so we have to provide our services fairly without discriminating between provinces."

Haqmal said that the department had its own issues to deal with.

"Every problem is solved when we have the infrastructure, but sometimes it takes longer to provide main facilities."

For the foreseeable future, families in the districts affected have little option but to move if they want their children to go to school.

Mohammad Aslam, 16, is originally from the Khakriz district of Kandahar. His family moved to the provincial capital so he could get an education, but the teenager said that his dearest wish was to be able to go to school back in his home village.

"The schools are closed in our area," he said. "We want them reopened so that we can study and continue our education locally without having to worry."

His schoolmate Zabihullah, a 14-year-old from the district of Shah Wali Kot, is in the same situation.

"The government should listen to us and reopen our schools as soon as possible," he said. "If the schools in our districts remain closed, the future of boys and girls our age will be even darker."

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