



## Afghanistan Begins Rebuilding its Education System

August 6, 2003

*After years of war and neglect the country of Afghanistan is attempting to rebuild its critically damaged educational system.*

The once robust and well-respected education system in Afghanistan has fallen into a state of neglect. War has destroyed more than 70 percent of the schools and there are not enough teachers or necessities such as textbooks and notebooks.

### **Urgent needs**

Under the repressive regime of the Taliban, the strict Islamic political and religious faction that ruled from 1996 till 2001, girls were not educated, boys' education focused mostly on religion and women were forbidden to work outside the home.

The results of these restrictions have left the education system in a shambles. UNICEF, the United Nations organization charged with protecting the rights of children, reports that more than 85 percent of the population has never been to school and that many will never receive a proper education.

According to Afghanistan's Minister of Education the task of rebuilding is urgent.

"Demand for education is exploding - at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. We cannot risk disappointing or leaving these children of the war generation out of the system. They're already vulnerable and traumatized," said Mohammad Younus Qanooni, the Minister of Education of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan.

"Yet from their ranks will come tomorrow's leaders," he added.

### **Education since the fall of the Taliban**

Since Afghan forces, aided by a massive U.S. bombing campaign, drove the Taliban from power in December 2001, an estimated 3 million children have enrolled in some form of education, mostly at the primary level. On average girls make up 30 percent of school-attending children, but in the southern and eastern parts of the country the number of girls attending school is far lower and remains at rates considered unacceptable to the Ministry of Education.

According to Afghan education authorities, more than 1.5 million school-age children will not be able to attend classes this year because there are not enough schools or teachers. The schools that

do exist often lack electricity, proper sanitation or drinking water. Outdoor classrooms work only as long as the weather remains warm and will close in the winter. Some land surrounding schools has been laced with land mines.

Even in the capital of Kabul, schools have few of items considered commonplace in American schools.

"We don't have pencils, we don't have notebooks and we sit on the floor," Abdul Samad, a student in Kabul, told Radio Free Europe.

### **Efforts to rebuild the education system**

To solve these problems the Ministry of Education is working with international organizations like the United Nations, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and private non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as Help the Afghan Children. Together, the groups are trying to build or renovate schools, provide books and other supplies and dramatically increase the number of qualified teachers, especially women, through training programs.

The aim is to provide education for all school-age children and reclaim the "lost generation" of students who were denied education during the war and Taliban rule.

"Education is the bedrock of any society. In Afghanistan, the education of girls and women is one of the single most imperative investments the country can make," said UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy.

The government and groups are also working to make teaching a more appealing profession. Although generally a well-respected profession, teaching remains a low paying one.

"A senior teacher gets about 1,800 to 2,000 afghanis a month, which is far below all standards. For this money, you cannot even buy enough food," Wahid Hadafmand, a teacher in Kabul, told Radio Free Europe. "I am not exaggerating. Many teachers, especially in Kabul and other cities, don't have a place to live. They cannot afford to rent a property."

The government is attempting to solve this problem by giving teachers special incentives such as reduced priced food and free medical services in state-run institutions.

*By Annie Schleicher, NewsHour Extra*