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Afghanistan: 'A Tale Of Two Students' Tells Nation's Fate

By Farangis Najibullah



The Taliban has forbidden girls from studying

(epa)

Marjan and Malalai have a lot in common. Both are Afghan. Both are girls. Both are 17-years-old. But for all the rest, the teens might as well inhabit different planets.

Marjan's biggest worry is deciding about her future career. The high-school student from the northern city of Mazar e-Sharif is having a hard time choosing whether to become a lawyer or teacher. Marjan attends Hashem-e Barat girls' school in the relatively prosperous and peaceful northern province of Balkh.

In an interview ahead of the start of the new academic year in most Afghan areas, Marjan tells Radio Free Europe /Radio Liberty that she loves going to school, studying, and socializing with friends and playing sports like volleyball.

"I really like it when our teachers give us homework. I enjoy doing my homework. And I like reading books. We have a library at school. We read books there," Marjan says.

Malalai, by contrast, is living a life-or-death drama.

Malalai would love to go to university and study to become a professional. Yet she's unsure whether she will even be able to finish high school in southern Helmand Province.

Unlike Balkh, Helmand is one of the least secure areas in Afghanistan. The province is known as a hotbed of Taliban violence and is the biggest drug-producing province in the war-torn country.

Many obstacles stand in Malalai's way. The Taliban, which forbid girls from studying during its severe rule, has burned down several local schools and attacked students and teachers. Those are fairly significant disincentives in an area where some conservative parents do not want daughters attending schools anyway.

"The situation is not good, but I still go to school. We appreciate our teachers helping us here at the school. We are very afraid of going to school because of insecurity, but they try to calm us down. We try hard and our teachers also want us to be teachers and doctors in the future," Malalai says.

Record Number Of Students

The contrasting fates of Marjan and Malalai starkly illustrate the different pace of progress across Afghanistan today. They also highlight the ups and downs of Afghanistan's education system as students and teachers in 9,000 schools in 29 provinces prepare for the new academic year's start on March 23.

The Afghan Education Ministry expects some 6.5 million children -- some 35 percent of them girls -- attend schools across the country. Historically, that's a record number of students, Zuhur Afghan, a ministry spokesman, told RFE/RL.

Many Afghans believe that restoring and expanding the country's education system has been one of Afghanistan's success stories after the fall of the hard-line Taliban in 2001.

The Education Ministry says it intends to start construction on 30 new schools in each province. In addition, at least one teacher-training school is being set up in every province. More than 50 million new textbooks will also be distributed at schools during the first day of the new academic year.

By any measure, this is massive success in a country where a few years ago girls couldn't even attend school and nonreligious subjects were barely taught. But success has come with a price.

Zuhur Afghan, the Education Ministry spokesman, says the lack of security remains the major concern for education workers.

As the Taliban has become more active over the past two years, they have increasingly aimed attacks at soft targets such as aid workers and other civilians. Officials say more than 230 people in the education sector have been killed. More than 220 others, including teachers and students, have been wounded in Taliban attacks. Many schools have also been torched, leaving 300,000 children temporarily out of school.

The Education Ministry acknowledges the international community's financial support to Afghanistan's education system. Most recently, the United Nations Children's Fund has appealed to donors to provide an additional \$15 million for Afghan schools.

That's a drop in the bucket compared to the \$3 billion that the Education Ministry says is needed to rebuild its educational system over the next five years. Nonetheless, Zuhur Afghan says the funds are needed now to build new schools and provide textbooks and other school materials.

"Sixty percent of our schools do not have a building; lessons take place in mosques, tents or simply under trees. Many schools lack desks, blackboards, and chalk. Many of our schools do not have water and sanitation facilities, such as bathrooms," Afghan says.

Nafisa Ghiyasi, the head of the Hashem-e Barat school in Mazar-e Sharif, tells RFE/RL that a key issue for her school was a shortage of classrooms. She says the school was waiting for funds from the government and donors to pay for new building and other key expenses, but the money never came.

Building ... Brick By Brick

So teachers and students took the matter into their own hands. "Everybody made a contribution," she says. "Some people brought bricks, others provided construction materials, while others offered their labor. And in a few weeks, parents and teachers built six additional classrooms."

Ghiyasi says such initiatives demonstrate that Afghans want their children to get an education. It's an opportunity that many parents never had.

Yet Ghiyasi says it's not enough and that her school, with some 4,000 students and more than 110 teachers, still faces shortages of just about everything.

"Teachers say, 'I don't want to go far, give me a job in the city center.' But there are too many teachers in city centers -- more than schools need. Other places lack teachers. For instance, my school faces a shortage of teachers of physics, math and English," Ghiyasi says.

Most teachers, especially female tutors, are reluctant to take jobs in remote villages. Zuhur Afghan says that the lack of female teachers in villages "is a huge issue" because most parents in villages refuse to send their daughter to school if the teacher is not a woman.

To attract more female teachers to village schools, the ministry has offered to pay them three times more than their regular salary. The ministry also offers jobs to the husband or a male relative of the female teacher to enable them to travel to and stay in rural areas.

Still, it's not easy drawing talent from big cities, and the Education Ministry has asked the government to provide additional funds to increase teachers' wages over the next three years.

"We have far too many challenges facing schools and teachers," Ghiyasi says. "Nevertheless, we should try to rebuild the education system both through our own power and donors' assistance. We owe it to future generations."