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**Developments in Education Tested by
Violence**

Matthew P. Dearing

Persistent and tragic violence has threatened one of the most important aspects of development in Afghanistan. Education provides not only short term success in offering employment, training, and opportunity for the people of Afghanistan, but it also ensures long term success in the process of developing that nation's human potential and promoting a tolerant, democratic society. Since 2001, school enrollment in Afghanistan has increased from 900,000 to nearly 5.4 million.¹ However, exceptional gains in education have been met with rising violence from totalitarian insurgent groups seeking to undermine development and the legitimacy of the Afghan government. To ensure the success of long term development, education must be protected from the violence of insurgents.

Education is an essential component of human capital and security.² An educated youth will provide a new generation of moderate leaders and a skilled workforce – necessary components of a developed society. A noted economist, Gary S. Becker has written that: “Indeed, in a modern economy, human capital is by far the most important form of capital in creating wealth and growth.”³ With limited or deprived education levels, long term economic development and stability will be jeopardized. Since the fall of the Taliban, the education component of human capital has been threatened by rising levels of violence throughout unprotected areas in Afghanistan.

Over the past few years, the growing insurgency in Afghanistan has evinced itself in repulsive violence on local schools throughout the country. The threats and narratives fashioned by the attacks give rise to ever more potent consequences as fear is spread throughout the country, thus limiting the ability and effectiveness of education in Afghanistan. To demonstrate the viciousness of attacks and their collateral results, in southern Afghanistan, more than 200,000 boys and girls were deprived of education after over 150 schools were set ablaze by insurgents in 2006, according to the Ministry of Education in Kabul.⁴ The Ministry also reported this year that over 400 schools remain closed in the south, east, and central part of the country due to violence.⁵

More than 20 schools have been torched and 17 students killed in the past 15 months in Helmand Province from Taliban and other insurgent groups.⁶ In

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response to this violence, more than 30,000 students who attended last year have been absent.⁷ Districts severely affected by the insurgency have closed all of their educational facilities to include Sangin, Greshk, and Musa Qala.⁸ As a result, Lashkargah, the capital of Helmand Province and a safe city in relation to surrounding districts, has experienced a surge of students from the surrounding region. Lashkargah has only 27 schools to accommodate the 35,000 students (more than half the student population in the province) that come for learning. Shifts in student populations have created increasingly difficult demands on instructors, parents, and the resident of Lashkargah, as schools are now forced to hold classes outdoors.

The use of terror on soft targets is a cowardly yet strategic means to shock the local and regional population into submission and weaken citizen reliance on the government. Taliban insurgent groups and other criminal factions have committed coordinated terrorist attacks on educational leadership, students, and facilities in order to generate fear among the citizens of Afghanistan. In one case, in January 2005 in Zabul Province, a teacher was decapitated in front of students at Sheik Mathi Baba School.⁹ Human Rights Watch correctly states that these attacks on institutions of human development are not only crimes against humanity, but in the context of on-going conflict in Afghanistan, war crimes.¹⁰

In coordination of such attacks, the Taliban often post “shabnamah” or night letters to warn local residents of upcoming attacks. Night letters are “extremely important” within the traditional culture of Afghanistan.¹¹ The letters are often posted during the night nearby mosques, government buildings, or in this case, education facilities. Professor Thomas H. Johnson of the Naval Postgraduate School and the director of Culture and Conflict Studies has conducted rigorous study of the narratives of Taliban Night Letters; he found they “represent a strategic and effective instrument, crafting poetic diatribe which appeal to the moral reasoning of Afghan villagers.”¹² Posted letters will often warn of attacks and continued violence if schools are not shut down and women denied access to schools. When such attacks take place, the letters take on greater significance as propaganda. The illiterate unable to read the letters soon hear of the danger of dealing with the international community via education facilities or other development projects. After attacks on 400 schools and 40 teachers in the past year, there are some districts where Taliban intimidation has shut down girls' education altogether.¹³ Thus, the Taliban have constructed an extremely efficient psychological operation that has yet to be effectively countered.

While Taliban propaganda tactics frighten the population, they do not break their resolve. Polls show that Afghans view the lack of education as one of the most important issues for Afghan women.¹⁴ Even under current security levels, 43 per cent of Afghan girls are now in school. In Helmand Province, headmaster

of Zokur High School Shadi Kan Ihan says, “We are happy to teach students even under worse circumstances, only if security is ensured.”¹⁵ ISAF and the Afghan National Police must provide the necessary elements to ensure security.

A coordinated effort to establish security in Southern Afghanistan is possible. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) must reinforce the trust and confidence of local leaders so that those leaders will bring information and concerns to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commanders. When a Night letter is posted, PRTs and ISAF must be notified and provide requisite security via the Afghan National Police (ANP). Each school should be outfitted with patrolling and stationary ANP in order to provide safety, security, and assurance to Afghan children, their parents, and their instructors. Most important, a deeper understanding of how to counter the misinformation campaign and threats posed by Taliban in the form of Night letters will help security forces and local leaders offset their impact on the perceptions of the local population. Counter-propaganda campaigns must be instituted to remind the local population of the costs and effects a return to Taliban rule would bring. Currently, the momentum of public opinion is in our favor; nationally, 89 percent of Afghans view the Taliban unfavorably and 93 percent believe the Taliban would not be able to provide security. Keeping public opinion on our side through an effective counter-propaganda campaign, and providing the essential tools local leaders need for development to be successful will ultimately invalidate the Taliban and their beliefs.

It would be a tragic mistake if the international community were to end their support of education and the broad array of development initiatives in Afghanistan; they are key to winning the hearts and minds of the population. Education is the foundation of any democratic nation and a necessary element of the human capital required to develop the economy into the future. Ensuring the youth are educated is vital to the future of Afghanistan. We must ensure we secure a safe and prosperous education.

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¹ Centre for Policy and Human Development. Afghanistan National Human Development Report 2007. <<http://www.cphd.af/nhdr/nhdr07/nhdr07.html>> (27 November 2007).

² I am grateful for Jarad Van Wagoner’s comments on human capital as well as his thesis publication: *The Demise of Russian Health Capital: The Continuity of Ineffective Government Policy*. Naval Postgraduate School. Monterey 2007. <http://www.nps.edu/programs/ccs/Docs/Pubs/Van%20Wagoner_thesis.pdf>

³ As quoted by Wheelan, Charles. *Naked Economics: Undressing the Dismal Science*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2002)1: 106.

⁴ Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN). Afghanistan: "Tribal Elders Reopening Southern Schools," *UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*, 7 Nov. 2006 <<http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=61784>> (27 Nov. 2007).

⁵ IRIN. Afghanistan: *Boy's Education Slides in Helmand*. 8 Oct. 2007. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=74690> accessed on 27 Nov. 2007.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Human Rights Watch *Lessons in Terror*.

<http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/afghanistan/2006/education/letter1.htm> accessed on 27 Nov. 2007.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Lessons in Terror, Attacks on Education in Afghanistan" (Summary) Vol 18. No. 6 <<http://hrw.org/reports/2006/afghanistan0706/afghanistan0706summary.pdf>.> (27 Nov. 2007).

¹¹ Johnson, Thomas H. "The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of Shabnamah (Night Letters)". *Small Wars and Insurgencies*. Vol 18. No. 3, 317-44. Sept. 2007.

http://www.nps.edu/Programs/CCS/Docs/Pubs/Small_Wars_%20Pub.pdf accessed on 27 Nov. 2007.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Globeandmail.com. *There are grounds for hope in Afghanistan*. Craig Charney and Isobel Coleman. June 18, 2007.

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20070617.wcomment0618/BNStory/International/home> accessed on: 27 Nov. 2007.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ IRIN. Afghanistan: "Boy's Education Slides in Helmand," *UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*. 8 Oct. 2007.