

BACK TO SCHOOL IN AFGHANISTAN

Introduction

Focus

After two decades of oppression and violence, the Afghan people are beginning to dig their way out of their dark ages to re-enter the modern world. In a country of almost 26 million people, only about 31 per cent are able to read and write. As few as eight per cent of girls are literate. Few Afghans have any formal education, and years of war have destroyed over 2000 schools and educational supports. The future of the war-torn nation may well lie in the halls of its shattered schools.

 Sections marked with this symbol indicate content suitable for younger viewers.

Despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the government of Afghanistan has started opening schools in what are the physical shells of former institutions. About 3.5 million students have jumped at the chance to learn and have filled the many makeshift schools.

Problems exist in all areas. Teachers are few; textbooks are limited and wholly inadequate. Buildings are half destroyed, having no running water, heating or even furniture. The curriculum, last revised during the war with the Soviet Union, is filled with references to *jihad*, or holy war, designed to create the soldiers of the next generation.

Girls and women have not seen the inside of a school in five years, since the Taliban banned them from seeking an education. Now, finally, they can continue their education and participate more actively in the resurrection of their country.

With the war between the United States and the Taliban drawing to a close, people are rebuilding and repopulating the schools. The new Ministry of Education is busy trying to undo the ills of the last curriculum, erasing references to war and replacing them with symbols of peace.

In a country where poverty was commonplace before the invasion of Russian forces in 1979, the past two

decades of war and oppression have only accentuated the problem. One out of every four children die before they reach their fifth birthday, while fully half of the 4.5 million children of school age suffer the effects of malnutrition. Despite this, three million students enrolled in school this year. They want to become doctors and teachers, engineers and leaders. Without an educated population, Afghanistan is destined to remain in poverty and destitution, with no hope for a better future for its children. Education is the key to the door of prosperity, a truth that even the youngest students sense.

It is likely that only an educated people will raise Afghanistan from the ashes of war. By withholding an education from so many people, the Taliban were able to maintain tight control over the nation. They used this strategy to force the population to accept the “rightness” of the Taliban philosophy. Hopefully in the future it will never again be possible for one group to control and restrict the lives of all Afghans. Afghanistan must find a way to produce strong, educated leaders for tomorrow who will be able to withstand this kind of indoctrination that dominated its tragic past.

Reflecting

1. Why is education important in Afghanistan?

2. How important is education in Canada?

3. How important is education to you? Why?

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Video Review

While watching this video report on the effort to rebuild education in Afghanistan respond to the questions on this page.

1. What is missing from the newly opened schools?

2. How long has it been since girls were in school?

3. What "aids" were used in the mathematics class?

4. Who produced the war-filled textbooks?

5. Who chose the material for the textbooks?

6. What happened to U.S. aid to Afghanistan after the Soviet war?

7. What three objectives do Afghan scholars have for a new Afghanistan?

8. Who has the contract to publish the new Afghan textbooks?

After watching the video, respond to the questions on this and the following page and reflect on education in Canada and in Afghanistan.

1. The textbooks used by Afghan students are filled with references to warfare and killing. Education was used by the revolutionary forces fighting the Russians as a tool to train the next generation of fighters. This effort was strongly supported by the U.S. in their efforts to assist Afghanistan in forcing the Soviet Union from their country. This effort was eventually successful. Do you think the end justified the means? Explain your response.

2. The U.S. spent approximately \$43-million producing and delivering the textbooks that promoted warfare. They have now contributed \$6.5-million to produce peaceful texts for Afghan schools. Considering the difference in spending, do you think the U.S. is doing enough to undo the damage done to children by the first set of texts? How might you explain the vast differences in spending on the two types of texts?

3. There are several references in the video stating that Afghan students are eager to participate in school. The tone of the video suggests that they would do almost anything to continue their studies despite extremely poor working conditions and very limited resources. Why do you think they feel this way? How does their attitude compare with the attitudes of Canadian students?

4. The Afghanistan government has stated, "Education is the bedrock of Afghanistan's future." What does this statement mean?

5. An official from the Afghanistan Ministry of Education stated that the three primary aims of education were to produce good Muslims, civilized Afghans, and a peace-loving people. How do these aims compare with your understanding of the purposes of Canadian education systems?

6. The video states that only 39 per cent of boys and three per cent of girls are attending school. How can non-governmental aid agencies help those in school and those outside of school?

Follow Up Activity

Compare and contrast education in Afghanistan with education in Canada. Use the following chart to organize your thoughts.

| Criteria | Afghanistan | Canada |
|-----------------------|-------------|--------|
| Physical Surroundings | | |
| Educational resources | | |
| Teachers | | |
| Student Behaviour | | |
| Future for Students | | |

Overall, what is your personal reaction to the reality of education in Afghanistan?

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Afghanistan: A Modern History Timeline

Did you know . . .
The vast majority of Canadian Muslims and Muslims worldwide reject the Taliban interpretation of the Koran?

1979 In December 1979 the Soviet Union invades Afghanistan. In a short period of time the Soviet Army occupies most of the populated centres in the country and settled down to continue the occupation.

1979-80 In the outlying areas resistance fighters called *mujahedeen* form pockets of fierce resistance. They are equipped with outdated weapons and are no match in pitched battle for the Soviets. The *mujahedeen* declare a *jihad*, or holy war, against the Soviets and seek aid from outside the country.

1980-1989 The United States, with the support of Pakistan, begins funneling military aide into Afghanistan, increasing the strength of the resistance.

1989 Eventually the Soviets are hemmed in by the resistance, and by 1989 the Soviet Union has abandoned Afghanistan.

1992 By 1992 the last vestiges of Soviet rule are removed, and the former allies in the resistance turn to fighting one another for control of Afghanistan.

1992-1998 Civil war rages until one faction, the Taliban, emerges as the strongest. By 1998, 90 per cent of Afghanistan is in Taliban control.

1996 The Taliban, an extremist fundamentalist Muslim faction, have an immediate impact on the lives of Afghanistan's people. They set up very restrictive regulations, based on their interpretation of the Koran. Women are immediately removed from positions of authority and are forced into seclusion. They are required to wear a *burqa* (a head-to-toe covering) and have to end their education after age eight. They are also denied the right to work.

September 2001 The Taliban support the actions of Osama bin Laden, allowing his Al Qaeda terrorists to live and train in the country. After the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, bin Laden becomes a prime target of the United States.

October 2001 The Taliban refuses to turn over bin Laden, so in October 2001 the U.S. leads a military invasion of Afghanistan and causes the collapse of the Taliban regime. Notably, bin Laden is not captured.

November 2001 Kabul falls to Northern Alliance and U.S. forces. The Taliban are effectively beaten.

March 23, 2002 Over 3000 schools open their doors to 1.5 million students. For the first time in five years girls over eight years old are able to attend school.

To Consider

1. What appear to be the central themes in Afghanistan's recent history?
2. Are you optimistic or pessimistic about Afghanistan's future? Explain.

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Education and Women in Afghanistan

In 1994 the Taliban gained effective control over 90 per cent of Afghanistan territory. This had an immediate impact on all women within the Taliban boundaries. Within days the schools were closed to all women under the age of eight. They were required to wear a *burqa*, a traditional head-to-toe covering that has only a slit of semi-transparent cloth in front of the eyes for sight. Women, who had been doctors and teachers, even one who had been an army general, were all forced to leave their jobs and retire to their homes. They were not permitted to walk outside alone. They could walk in public only when accompanied by a male relative: husband, father, brother, etc. Women were forbidden to talk to strangers and took their lives in their hands every time they left their home.

If they walked loudly they could be beaten. If a glimpse of an ankle was seen in public they could be beaten. Women were forbidden to wear make-up, high-heeled shoes, bright clothing or to play sports. Homes with women inside had to have the windows painted over. Riding a bus was taboo, as was loud laughter. Many displaced women teachers continued to hold classes quietly in their homes. Each day this could lead to severe consequences. This situation lasted for five years.

Here are a number of newspaper reports describing the new system of education in Afghanistan. Read these articles and answer the questions that follow.

***Dallas Morning News* — March 30, 2002**

Her wide-eyed third-graders—all girls—sat on the floor, so thrilled to

be in school they seemed not even to notice that their makeshift classroom had no blackboard, no books, no desks and no chairs. But the only reason they were there at all, Ms. Najib pointed out, is that there is no Taliban either.

“For five years, we had to sit at home and do nothing,” she said, releasing her pent-up bitterness over the oppression of women and harsh Islamic rule imposed by Afghanistan’s former Taliban leadership. “A girl sitting at home is a girl who is learning not to study. Then they grow into women who don’t know anything. For me, a society without educated women is like a body without bones.”

***Christian Science Monitor* — March 26, 2002**

All girls were required to take placement exams that allowed some to advance if, for example, they had attended secret home schooling during the Taliban years. Those who did not, such as 22-year-old Farhad Aga, now awkwardly sit in classes with young children.

“My age doesn’t embarrass me. What I care about is getting an education, and if this is how I must do it, I don’t care,” she said.

***Kyodo World News Service* — August 1, 2002**

Many rural and small-town Afghans have never accepted education of women. . . . In May, people pasted leaflets on the school that said infidels were trying to corrupt the youth of Afghanistan and that parents should resist sending their children to school. . . . Mohibullah Zawuddin, a 30-year-old shop owner

in Panjawai, displays the type of stubborn beliefs educators are up against. "I will never allow my girls to go to school," said Zawuddin, who has two daughters, 7 and 8. "Islam says women should not be allowed outside. The boys need education so they can work or serve the country, but the girls will be married soon. They don't need it."

***The Toronto Star* — February 17, 2002**

(At) Kandahar Intermediate Medical College . . . Hurl Nisa (said) . . . "The first time we came here was the happiest time of our lives . . . There was no system for us for more than 20 years. We were allowed to be the first. We had little education up to

that point, but it was inside our homes, taken from our parents. So it has been a great challenge to come here and be faced with medical subjects. But we are succeeding."

Adiba Saïam . . . plans to follow in her parents' footsteps and proceed to medical school.

"It is my goal to be a doctor by age 20," she said. "I am so proud of my parents for what they have built. They are the best doctors in the region. And my mother has been very strict in teaching me."

Saïam: "But we also want education. And now we have the freedom for all to acquire it. Please tell the people of Canada not to think of women in Afghanistan as oppressed. We are happy with our lives now."

Questions

1. Carefully list the major challenges of the recent return to schools in Afghanistan.

2. Considering the severe restrictions on life for Afghan women over the previous five years, and the still limited existence of most women and girls, explain how they consistently describe themselves as happy.

3. Consider these two statements:

"A society without educated women is like a body without bones"

"The boys need education so they can work or serve the country, but the girls will be married soon. They don't need it."

With which of these statements do you most agree? Why?

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News Data: The Brutal Facts

Further Research

To learn more about UNICEF's role in rebuilding the Afghan education system, visit www.unicef.org.uk/news/Presscentre/Afghanistan/Education

The United Nations created UNICEF. The full name is the United Nations Children's Fund. UNICEF works in many countries across the globe trying to improve the quality of life for the young people of the world. Survey the facts on education in Afghanistan that were compiled by UNICEF.

Key statistics on education in Afghanistan (2000 data)

Literacy: Estimates put the figure for men at around 40% and for women at less than 10%, possibly as low as four per cent. This is one of the lowest literacy rates in the world.

School buildings: More than 2000 school buildings have been damaged or destroyed in the past 20 years of fighting.

Teachers and school-age children: The country has only about 20 000 qualified teachers, but more than four million children in the primary school age group. A large number of unqualified teachers will be needed as well as a training program to upgrade their skills.

Children in urgent need of schooling: UNICEF expects that about 1.5 million students (about one-third of those in the primary school age group) will want to go to school at the beginning of the next school year (in March 2003). UNICEF is committed to

supporting these students and their teachers according to the mandate as outlined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Gross primary school enrolment for 2000: 3% for girls, 39% for boys.

Official primary school enrolment for 1978 (when the Afghan conflict began): 8% for girls, 37% for boys. (These statistics show that while there is definitely a decline, it is also clear that access to education was never widespread in Afghanistan, and that gender imbalance predates the Taliban.)

The value of a teacher's salary: The value of a teacher's salary is the equivalent of between US\$1.5 and \$5 per month, which is not only grossly inadequate but is also rarely paid at all.

School/initiatives outside the formal school system serving about 8-10% of primary school children: In 2000, UNICEF provided direct support to non-discriminatory education activities for girls and boys in a number of community-based and home-based education projects in Taliban-held rural and urban areas. By the end of 2000, UNICEF had supported the education of about 90 000 children in Taliban-held areas. In opposition-held Badakhshan province (where girls still had access to formal schools) UNICEF supported the education of 19 500 children.

Analysis

1. What statistics do you find most revealing? Why?

2. What evidence is there that educational problems in Afghanistan are not solely the responsibility of the Taliban?

3. Should the Canadian government or individual Canadians do anything about the educational situation in Afghanistan? Explain.

4. Working in small groups, prepare a list of suggestions for UNICEF to guide its work in this desperate nation. Analyze the statistics closely. Decide what you believe should be the priorities in rebuilding the education system in Afghanistan. Then draft a simple Five-point Action Program. Be prepared to share your ideas with your peers.

Our Action Program

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

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A Charitable Response

Many people throughout the world are active in the struggle to rebuild the beautiful but shattered nation of Afghanistan. At present, heavily armed soldiers from many nations and regions patrol the towns and villages, but real progress will be made with books, not bombs and bullets.

Books for Freedom

New York Times – February 10, 2002
— John F. Burns

Dr. Aziz Ahmad Rahmand (of) Kabul University . . . was supervising entry examinations, the kind of duty senior professors in most other countries might shun. But not in Afghanistan, where the source of the professor's bliss lay in the fact that row upon row of women were taking the exam beside men in the library and in many another unheated hall across the biting cold campus. . . . the female candidates, many of whom wore their finest shoes to trudge through miles of snow and slush, were mostly 18- to 25-year-olds liberated from five years of Taliban rule spent at home doing chores, and dreaming, as many said, of the improbable day when they might again study to become lawyers, doctors, engineers and teachers.

[The Taliban mullahs would] ban books from the library, or have their followers shooting Kalashnikov rounds at proscribed volumes on gynecology and human rights and other abhorred subjects that now sit as testaments to the Taliban's ways in glass cases in the library's lobby.

Books . . . are in short supply. Years of no acquisitions along with theft and book burning—and that novelty of Taliban literary criticism, book shooting—have left many shelves in the library empty.

The chief librarian [made] a special request. "We say hello to the educated people in the Western countries," he said, "and we ask them, kindly, if you have any books about the technical and scientific

world, engineering, literature—anything!—please send them to us. . . . The Afghan people are in darkness, and we ask the Western countries to help us shine some light.

The National Library of Afghanistan has been similarly damaged. In it very few volumes survive from before the Soviet invasion of 1979. Just as at the university, books have been stolen, burned and shot. Equally, the need is great for this library to regain some of its former stature.

In response to these two situations, the charitable organization Books for Freedom was created. Its aim is to collect books for libraries and schools in Afghanistan. The organizers have developed a comprehensive list of the types of books and the languages needed to meet the needs of Afghanistan. The Web site for this non-profit charity is: www.booksforfreedom.org/contact.html.

Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan

Since 1998 a Canadian charitable organization based in Calgary, Women for Women in Afghanistan (W4WAfghan), has operated to support human rights for women in Afghanistan. This has been done through a number of grassroots projects that have raised awareness and funds across Canada in support of necessary projects in Afghanistan. Among these projects are several aimed at promoting the education of the women oppressed under Taliban rule. Since the fall of the Taliban, these projects have taken on a

Other Canadian-based aid organizations include CERA, the Canadian Engineers for the Reconstruction of Afghanistan. They can be reached at www.thecera.org.

sense of urgency, as the opportunity now exists to make substantial contributions without having to circumvent the oppressive Taliban. Chapters of Women for Women in Afghanistan now exist across Canada, providing support to on-site non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Afghan Women's Resources Centre (AWRC). These are centres for educational and vocational training aimed at "empowering Afghan women through the provision of the skills and knowledge needed to support themselves and their families, and to contribute actively in the rebuilding of Afghanistan."

Another small grassroots organization in Kabul supported by W4Wafghan is PARSA (Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Support for Afghanistan).

"PARSA reaches thousands of Afghan women and children through a variety of projects by providing counselling, job training, financial assistance and income opportunities. PARSA's educational programs have provided high-quality schooling for over 1000 students, both young and adult, and also employed 33 female home-school teachers until the official opening of the Afghan school year in March 2002." (Information and quotes from the writing of J. Eisenhauer; C. Reicher)

While other agencies are devoted to the physical and medical needs of Afghan women, the two listed specifically have as part of their mandate the education of female Afghans.

Women for Women in Afghanistan can be found on the Web at www.w4wafghan.ca.

Activity

Do one of the following:

Create a full-page, full-colour magazine or poster advertisement that promotes a fundraiser for one of the NGO charities listed above.

OR

Write a letter to one of the listed NGO charities describing a fund or material-raising activity that you are prepared to initiate to support the aims of that charity.

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Moral Dilemma

The McMaster Center for Peace Studies in Hamilton, Ontario, is involved in ongoing efforts to build peaceful relationships among the peoples of Afghanistan. To view their ideas and activities, visit www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~mpeia/afghanistan.htm

As stated in the video, the United States was instrumental in publishing the textbooks for Afghan children during the time of the Afghan-Soviet war. These textbooks were filled with references to the Russians, the *mujahedeen*, weaponry, and *jihad* . They were designed to indoctrinate young children in the art of war so as to provide a new generation of fighters to chase the Soviet armies from Afghanistan. Over a decade later, long after the Russians fled the country, these books are still the main source of information for Afghan children.

The United States published these books as a part of their plan to defeat the Soviet Union in what became the last conflict of the Cold War. They provided guns through the CIA and non-military support through the Agency for International Development (AID). This non-military support was in

part designed to create warlike children. At a cost of \$43-million, these violent textbooks were produced and left in the hands of Afghan children for more than 20 years.

Not surprisingly, war and oppression have existed throughout Afghanistan for the whole time. Some Americans believe that the interests of the *mujahedeen* in Afghanistan and those of the United States coincided at the time of the Afghan-Soviet war. Both wanted to defeat the Soviets and free Afghanistan from Soviet control. The Afghan rebel leaders felt it necessary to indoctrinate the children to hate Russians and support the *jihad* . They needed to be able to handle weapons (largely provided by the United States) and they needed to be able to kill when necessary. Perhaps few considered the longer-term results of this policy.

Activity

Write a newspaper editorial supporting *or* condemning the U.S. publication and distribution of warlike textbooks to assist in freeing Afghanistan from Soviet control.

Note: Review the editorials that exist in one or more of your local newspapers to get a better idea of the length and format of a newspaper editorial.

Use the space below to prepare a list of arguments and a simple plan for what you intend to write.
