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## As War Enters Classrooms, Fear Grips Afghans

By **BARRY BEARAK**

With their teacher absent, 10 students were allowed to leave school early. These were the girls the gunmen saw first, 10 easy targets walking hand-in-hand through the blue metal gate and on to the winding dirt road.

The staccato of machine-gun fire pelted through the stillness. A 13-year-old named Shukria was hit in the arm and the back, and then teetered into the soft brown of an adjacent wheat field. Zarmina, her 12-year-old sister, ran to her side, listening to the wounded girl's precious breath and trying to help her stand.

But Shukria was too heavy to lift, and the two gunmen, sitting astride a single motorbike, sped closer.

As Zarmina scurried away, the men took a more studied aim at those they already had shot, killing Shukria with bullets to her stomach and heart. Then the attackers seemed to succumb to the frenzy they had begun, forsaking the motorbike and fleeing on foot in a panic, two bobbing heads -- one tucked into a helmet, the other swaddled by a handkerchief -- vanishing amid the earthen color of the wheat.

Six students were shot here on the afternoon of June 12, two of them fatally. The Qalai Sayedan School -- considered among the very best in the central Afghan province of Logar -- reopened only last weekend, but even with Kalashnikov-toting guards at the gate, only a quarter of the 1,600 students have dared to return.

Shootings, beheadings, burnings and bombings: these are all tools of intimidation used by the Taliban and others to shut down hundreds of Afghanistan's public schools. To take aim at education is to make war on the government.

Parents are left with peculiar choices. "It is better for my children to be alive even if it means they must be illiterate," said Sayed Rasul, a father who had decided to keep his two daughters at home for a day.

Afghanistan surely has made some progress toward development, but most often the nation seems astride some pitiable rocking horse, with each lurch forward inevitably reversed by the backward spring of harsh reality.

The schools are one vivid example. The Ministry of Education claims that 6.2 million children are now enrolled, or about half the school-age population. And while statistics in Afghanistan can be unreliably confected, there is no doubt that attendance has multiplied far beyond that of any earlier time, with uniformed children now teeming through the streets each day, flooding classrooms in two and three shifts.

A third of these students are girls, a marvel itself. Historically, girls' education has been undervalued in Afghan culture. Girls and women were forbidden from school altogether during the Taliban rule.

But after 30 years of war, this is a country without normal times to reclaim; in so many ways, Afghanistan must start from scratch. The accelerating demand for education is mocked by the limited supply. More than half the schools have no buildings, according to the Ministry of Education; classes are commonly held in tents or beneath trees or in the brutal, sun-soaked openness.

Only 20 percent of the teachers are even minimally qualified. Texts are outdated; hundreds of titles need to be written, and millions of books need to be printed. And then there is the violence. In the southern provinces where the Taliban are most aggressively combating American and NATO troops, education has virtually come to a halt in large swaths of the contested regions. In other areas, attacks against schools are sporadic, unpredictable and perplexing.

By the ministry's estimate, there have been 444 attacks since last August. Some of these were simple thefts. Some were instances of tents put to the torch. Some were audacious murders under the noon sun.

"By attacking schools, the terrorists want to make the point of their own existence," said Mohammad Hanif Atmar, the minister of education.

Western-educated and notably energetic, Mr. Atmar is the nation's fifth education minister in five and a half years, but only the first to command the solid enthusiasm of international donors. Much of the government is awash in corruption and cronyism. But Mr. Atmar comes to the job after a much-praised showing as the minister of rural redevelopment.

He has laid out an ambitious five-year plan for school construction, teacher training and a modernized curriculum. He is also championing a parallel track of madrasas, or religious schools; students would focus on Islamic studies while also pursuing science, math and the arts.

"This society needs faith-based education, and we will be happy to provide it without teaching violence and the abuse of human rights," Mr. Atmar said.

To succeed, the minister must prove a magnet for foreign cash. And donors have not been unusually generous when it comes to schools. Since the fall of the Taliban, the United States Agency for International Development has devoted only 5 percent of its Afghanistan budget to education, compared with 30 percent for roads and 14 percent for power.

Virtually every Afghan school is a sketchbook of extraordinary destitution. "I have 68 girls sitting in this tent," said Nafisa Wardak, a first-grade teacher at the Deh Araban Qaragha School in Kabul. "We're hot. The tent is full of flies. The wind blows sand and garbage everywhere. If a child gets sick, where can I send her?"

The nation's overwhelming need for walled classrooms makes the killings in Qalai Sayedan all the more tragic. The school welcomed boys through grade 6 and girls through grade 12. It was terribly overcrowded, with the 1,600 students, attending in two shifts, stuffed into 12 classrooms and a corridor.

But the building itself was exactly that: two stories of concrete with a roof of galvanized steel, and not a collection of weather-molested tents. Two years ago, Qalai Sayedan was named the top school in the province. Its principal, Bibi Gul, was saluted for excellence and rewarded with a trip to America.

But last month's attack on the school caused parents to wonder if the school's stalwart reputation had not itself become a source of provocation. Qalai Sayedan is 40 miles south of Kabul, and while a dozen other schools in Logar Province have been attacked, none has been as regularly, or malignly, singled out. Three years ago, Qalai Sayedan was struck by rockets during the night. A year ago, explosives tore off a corner of the building.

In the embassies of the West, and even within the Education Ministry in Kabul, the Taliban are commonly discussed as a monolithic adversary. But to the villagers here, with the lives of their children at risk, it is too simplistic to assume the attacks were merely part of some broad campaign of terror.

People see the government's enemies as a varied lot with assorted grievances, assorted tribal connections and assorted masters. Villagers ask, has anyone at the school provided great offense? Is the school believed to be un-Islamic?

At the village mosque, many men blame Ms. Gul, the principal. "She should not have gone to America without the consultation of the community," said Sayed Abdul Sami, the uncle of Saadia, the other slain student. "And she went to America without a mahram, a male relative to accompany her, and this is considered improper in Islam."

Sayed Enayatullah Hashimi, a white-bearded elder, said the school had flaunted its success too openly. "The governor paid it a visit," he said disparagingly. "He brought with him 20 bodyguards, and these men went all over the school -- even among the older girls."

Education is the fast track to modernity. And modernity is held with suspicion.

Off the main highway, 100 yards up the winding dirt road and through the blue metal gate, sits the school. It was built four years ago by the German government.

On Monday, Ms. Gul greeted hundreds of children as they fidgeted in the morning light: "Dear boys and brave girls, thank you for coming. The enemy has done its evil deeds, but we will never allow the doors of this school to close again."

These would be among her final moments as their principal. She had already resigned. "My heart is crying," she said privately. "But I must leave because of everything that people say. They say I received letters warning about the attacks. But that isn't so. And people say I am a foreigner because I went to the United States without a mahram. We were 12 people. I'm 42 years old. I don't need to travel with a mahram."

In the village, she wears a burqa, enveloped head to toe in lavender fabric. This is a conservative place. For some, the very idea of girls attending school into their teens is a breach of tradition.

Shukria, the slain 13-year-old, was considered a polite girl who reverently studied the Koran. Saadia, the other student killed, was remarkable in that she was married and 25. She had refused to let age discourage her from finishing an education interrupted by the Taliban years. She was about to graduate.

A new sign now sits atop the steel roof. The Qalai Sayedan School has been renamed the Martyred Saadia School. Another place will be called Martyred Shukria.

For three days now, students have been asked to return to class. Each morning, more of them appear. Older girls and women are quite clearly the most reluctant to return.

Shukria's home is only a short walk from the school. Nafiza, the girl's mother, was still too scalded with grief to mutter more than a few words. Shukria's uncle, Shir Agha, took on the role of family spokesman.

"We have a saying that if you go to school, you can find yourself, and if you can find yourself, you can find God," he said proudly. "But for a child to attend school, there must be security. Who supplies that security?"

Zarina, the 12-year-old who had seen her sister killed, was called into the room. She was not ready to return to school, she said. Even the sound of a motorbike now made her hide. But surely the fear would subside, her uncle reassured her. She must remember that she loves school, that she loves to read, that she loves to scribble words on paper.

Someday, she would surely resume her studies, he told her.

But the heartbroken girl could not yet imagine this. "Never," she said.