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Schoolgirls Under Fire

Women again have legal rights in Afghanistan. But more than six years after American forces helped drive the Taliban from power, the women and girls of Afghanistan are still living with the threat of terror in their daily lives.

It was heartbreaking to read the other day about the shooting of six public school students — two fatally — by armed rebels out to discredit the government and intimidate other parents from sending their daughters to school. That attack, sadly, was no isolated incident. As Barry Bearak reported in Tuesday's Times, shootings, beheadings, burnings and bombings have at least temporarily shut down hundreds of Afghanistan's public schools.

Schools and schoolgirls are now a target because they represent one of the new government's proudest achievements and a source of hope for Afghans. With only limited help from the United States and other foreign donors, thousands of new schools have been built or rebuilt and, according to government figures, more than six million children of both sexes are now enrolled in classes, roughly half the total school-age population.

Things could be a lot better. Because the Afghan government is poor and because Washington would rather spend its aid dollars on roads, power and security assistance, many of those classes must be taught outdoors, for lack of sturdy buildings, and taught poorly, for lack of trained teachers. Providing armed protection to every school may not be practical, but clearly there is a lot more that Washington could and should be doing to improve both security and educational quality.

The United States and other NATO countries now have more than 50,000 troops in Afghanistan. And next year Washington is expected to provide more than \$1 billion in humanitarian and reconstruction aid. That figure still pales when compared with Afghanistan's needs and the billions being spent each week to fight the disastrous Iraq war.

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