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**CHILD  
ALERT**

## **AFGHANISTAN**

MARTIN BELL REPORTS ON CHILDREN CAUGHT IN WAR

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A child's first right is the right to life. This is being denied in Afghanistan on an ever-increasing scale.

## Children as victims

In a war among the people, children may be more in the line of fire than any group except the fighters themselves, and they are often at even greater risk than the fighters. Children are easy targets. They are inquisitive and curious. They play on streets and gather in crowded places. They are especially vulnerable to two insurgent techniques utilized in Iraq and then in Afghanistan: suicide bombings and improvised explosive devices, also called roadside bombs.

Through centuries of warfare, the suicide bomber was unknown in Afghanistan. But suicide bombings are now used regularly by the Taliban and other insurgents, sometimes in assassination attempts but usually against international military vehicles and convoys. It is a common feature of attacks on convoys that the casualties are higher among civilian bystanders, especially children, than among the intended targets. The soldiers are armed, travelling in armoured vehicles and protected by their body armour. The children have no protection.

- On 15 June 2007, in Tirin Kot, Uruzgan Province, 12 children were killed when a suicide bomber rammed his car into an international military convoy near a school playground.
- On 19 March 2007, in Kabul, a 14-year-old child was killed during an attack on an American convoy.
- On 8 March 2007, in Kandahar, three children were injured when a suicide bomber targeted a Canadian military convoy. One week later, another child was killed in a similar attack.
- On 21 November 2006, in Khost, four children were injured when a suicide bomber attacked NATO soldiers who were handing out sweets to children.
- On 17 October 2006, in Lashkar Gar, Helmand Province, two children were killed during an attack on a British patrol.

From time to time, and for countries and regions where children are most at risk, UNICEF produces emergency reports known as *Child Alerts*. These are both milestones and distress signals. As milestones, they show what has been done and what still needs to be done on the road to rescue and recovery of lost childhoods. As distress signals, these alerts often reflect the victimization of children by war and civil unrest in a deteriorating situation. They describe the lives of children caught in armed conflict, defenceless and living on the edge in conditions of danger and deprivation.

Drawing on the hard-won experience of UNICEF staff in the field, *Child Alerts* have no political agenda. Previous editions have covered Darfur, Haiti, the Horn of Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They tell the story of young people who are not only casualties of war but also, in extreme cases, 'perpetrators' as well as victims. Afghanistan is in some respects the most extreme of these cases.

*Child Alert: Afghanistan* was written by Martin Bell, UNICEF Ambassador for Humanitarian Emergencies, following an assignment to Afghanistan during July and August 2007. He was formerly a BBC war reporter and an Independent Member of the British Parliament.

- On 28 August 2006, also in Lashkar Gar, a bomb exploded in a crowded bazaar, killing 15 people and wounding 47, including 15 children.

But not only the Taliban and other insurgents are doing the fighting, and concerns extend to the operations of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which supports the Afghan Government. Of the 37 nations in ISAF, it is principally Canada, the United

Kingdom and the United States that are engaged in combat in the south and east of Afghanistan. Their intensive use of air power in support of ground troops, whose numbers are limited, is putting children at risk. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission believes that neither side has respected the laws of armed conflict and that children in particular are more vulnerable than they have been at any time during the war. The commission's records include, for example, an account of a two-day battle in Helmand Province, in June 2007, during which the Taliban were engaged in action against the combined forces of ISAF and Afghan soldiers and police. Neither side appeared to suffer any casualties, but air strikes claimed the lives of 27 civilians, including 17 children.

ISAF spokespersons have accused the Taliban of deliberately operating among civilians and using schools as bases and children as human shields. The NATO countries are signatories of the Geneva Conventions, which commit them to the protection of civilians in armed conflict. The Taliban, of course, have not signed any international treaty or convention.

ISAF maintains that it does not target civilians or practise wide-area bombing. Its aircraft are called in by field commanders against known Taliban positions, and its munitions are directed as precisely as possible to hit them. It admits, however, that some civilian casualties are inevitable and has expressed regret for these casualties.

## Children as perpetrators

A particularly disturbing feature in the conflict in Afghanistan has been the use of children as combatants, both as child soldiers and, more recently, as suicide bombers:

- A six-year-old boy from a village in Ghazni Province, from a poor background, was reportedly tricked by the Taliban into wearing a suicide vest that “would spray out flowers if he pressed a button.” He failed to carry out the mission because he became confused and sought help from the Afghan military.

- A 16-year-old Afghan boy was ordered to wear a vest full of explosives and detonate it in Ghazni. “The remote control battery was with me, but I could not do it and threw the battery away,” he recalled. “I realized that the target was not foreigners only but also Afghans ... If I didn't do it, they said I would go to hell.”
- A 15-year-old Afghan boy from Gardez City, arrested after his bomb failed to explode, said, “The mullah in Gardez told me I will occupy a place in *Jannat* [Paradise] if I kill a foreigner. I wanted a place in *Jannat*.”

In April 2007, a video was obtained by the Associated Press Television News in Peshawar, on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The video shows a young boy beheading an adult in a Taliban

### A CHILD IN NEED: Rahmatuallah

Rahmatuallah is 14 years old and comes from a front-line village in Kandahar Province. After his father was killed in the war, he and the rest of the family – his mother and six brothers and sisters – fled to temporary shelter in the provincial capital. There, the war found him again. Last year, when one of his brothers was working in a shop, Rahmatuallah went out to get food for him. On the way back, he stepped on an anti-personnel mine that blew off his right leg.

Now he is training to be an electrician in one of the UNICEF-funded centres for war-affected children in Kandahar. Most of Rahmatuallah's fellow students are former child soldiers, who were recruited by local commanders, carried guns and manned checkpoints. Some were in combat. All are victims of war.

Rahmatuallah is brought to the centre every day on the back of his brother's bicycle. “Many of my relatives have died in the war,” he said. “All I want is to be able to earn my living and not to be a burden on anyone else.” UNICEF is helping him achieve that.



execution. From incidents such as these, it is clear that the conflict in and around Afghanistan involves not just the violation of human rights but the abuse of children and the theft of childhoods on a scale that is extreme, shocking and savage.

In these cases, the perpetrators are, of course, also victims. Underage fighters are victimized by the fact of their recruitment. But their use, which is a war crime, raises complex questions of child protection: What degree of force is legitimate to use against a suspected suicide bomber who is also a child? Has he forfeited his rights as a child by acting as a bomber? In what circumstances are the security forces justified in opening fire?

The forced recruitment of children as combatants is part of a broader, more familiar phenomenon of children used in war. Child soldiers are commonly recruited by warlords and used in tribal warfare. They served in the ranks of the irregular armies that overthrew the Taliban. While they were sometimes forced to fight, they were more frequently used as guards, cooks and commanders' personal servants. Many girls were also used by armed groups and, as in other conflicts, exploited for sex or cheap labour.

UNICEF and its partners have made, and are still making, a great effort to demobilize and retrain Afghanistan's child soldiers. UNICEF has spent US\$250,000 from its overstretched resources to set up vocational schools for 500 war-affected children in Kandahar, Afghanistan's second largest city, and in the outlying districts of Arghandab, Boldak, Daman and Dand. Studying separately, the girls learn tailoring while the boys learn carpentry, electronics, plumbing, ironwork and motor repair.

The demobilization, disarmament and retraining of children exploited by armed forces and groups is one of Afghanistan's success stories. But the success is provisional. As in other conflicts, when the security situation deteriorates, there is a real danger that young people – vulnerable and unable to use their new skills in the marketplace – will again be recruited into armed groups that can offer them protection. The concept of children's rights is new to

### A CHILD IN NEED: Zarmina Aga

Zarmina is 12 years old. She and her 13-year-old sister, Shukria, were among 1,200 pupils at the Qalai Sayedan School for girls near the provincial capital of Logar, south of Kabul. On 13 June 2007, two gunmen lay in wait for the girls as they left the school. Two of the girls were killed, as well as an older student who was also a teacher's assistant. Shukria was first wounded and then shot again by the assailants. She died in Zarmina's arms, one of three fatalities that day, marking the fourth attack on the same school. Her uncle, Khan Ahmadyar, described the killers as worse than wild animals. Yet, despite what happened, Zarmina is determined to stay in school and finish her studies.

### A CHILD IN NEED: Noor Zia

Noor Zia is 11 years old. She lives with her parents, four sisters and two brothers near Kabul. Her father is too sick to work. The family's only breadwinner is an older sister who teaches art at a special school to educate destitute children and give them the skills they need to stay off the streets. They are also taught landmine awareness. There are estimated to be as many as 60,000 destitute and street children in Afghanistan. Noor is one of them. While she lives with her family, she works on the streets, collecting discarded plastic or anything she can find to sell and bring some food to the table.

"My hope for the future of Afghanistan is that it should become one united country, and that our parents have jobs and earn money so that they can look after their children better," she said. "If we could go to school and learn knowledge, then we will be able to build Afghanistan and have a peaceful country in the future."

Afghanistan, but it is beginning to take hold at the national level. No children are recruited into the Afghan National Army or into the police. Children's advocates are concerned about the police auxiliary, however, because there have been anecdotal reports that it maintains informal associations with children. The Taliban, who respect no laws or conventions, remain the greatest cause for concern. However, the insurgency is not thought to be using large numbers of underage fighters at this time. Young men living in areas not controlled by the central government may be drawn to fight for the Taliban because they will be better paid than if they join the Afghan Army. Volunteers are not in short supply, and the Taliban can rely on the recruitment of adults, both national and foreign.

## Health care: Darkness and light

Afghanistan has made progress in providing health care, notably in immunization and the control of communicable diseases. But very little has been achieved in other areas, and its citizens, especially its children, are among the most endangered in the world.

UNICEF estimates that in 2006, nearly 900 children under age five died every day. Maternal mortality is also a major concern. According to UNICEF estimates, in 2005, more than 60 women died every day from pregnancy-related causes, leaving Afghanistan with one of the world's worst maternal death rates, second only to Sierra Leone.

There are a number of factors contributing to this inordinately high rate of maternal mortality. Afghanistan's fractional primary health-care system is dysfunctional, with almost no procedure for referrals. Few hospitals exist outside the main cities and towns, and health facilities are ill-equipped and chronically short of even the basics, such as equipment, essential medicines or sterile gloves. Clinics in rural areas are scattered and often inaccessible during winter. There is a shortage of trained nurses and midwives, and babies are usually delivered at home with the help of friends or neighbours. If complications occur, it may be too late to save the life of the mother or child. According to the most recent

UNICEF estimates, only 14 per cent of births are attended by skilled health personnel.

The characteristics of Afghan society play an equal role in the unnecessary loss of life. In Afghanistan,

### An interview with Catherine Mbengue

Catherine Mbengue, UNICEF Country Representative in Afghanistan, leads an operation with 250 staff members working out of the headquarters in Kabul and regional offices in Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Mazar-i-Sarif. The budget for this UNICEF Country Office is US\$80 million, not all of which has yet been raised.

**Catherine Mbengue:** In the first six months of this year, 44 schools have been attacked. Students and teachers have been killed. In some places parents are afraid to send their children to school, even though they wish to do so. Declining security prevents health workers from accessing 40 per cent of the country. Some of these areas have not been accessible for many months.

**Interviewer:** It sounds as though you think the situation is getting worse?

**Mbengue:** Compared to the enthusiasm that we all shared in 2002, indeed, they are not getting better.

**Interviewer:** What is UNICEF's view of the use of children as suicide bombers?

**Mbengue:** It is something that we condemn strongly. We know that when children are engaged in any conflict it is a crime against international law. This has a terrible emotional and psychological impact on children. We cannot let it happen.

**Interviewer:** Are you more inclined to hope or to despair?

**Mbengue:** We have no right to despair. We have no right to leave the children of Afghanistan without hope. We will continue to do all that we can for the children, because they are the future of this country.

where the pace of change is glacial and men and women still lead separate and disparate lives, it is hard for health workers to breach the walls of tradition and bring health care or even basic information to the women whose lives depend on it. Furthermore, there are vast tracts of the country that the government does not control and where health workers enter at risk of being taken hostage or even killed.

Although progress in maternal health is agonizingly slow, Afghanistan can be proud of its efforts to stamp out communicable diseases. Its polio campaign is nothing short of heroic, and it is setting an example to the world of what can be achieved under the most dire circumstances. In 2006, the upsurge of fighting in Afghanistan coincided with an alarming increase in the number of polio cases reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF. Thirty-one new cases were reported, nearly all of which occurred in the areas of conflict that could not be reached by immunization teams.

In 2007, despite the continuing insecurity, that number was reduced to only nine cases at the time of this writing. This has been achieved with the help of the Ministry of Public Health, UNICEF and WHO. But most of all, it was assisted by the dedication of Afghan volunteers; by the involvement of elders and imams working from mosque to mosque and health workers from house to house; and by a growing awareness that polio, like smallpox before it, can be eradicated from the face of the earth.

To combat the spread of polio, an immunization programme is carried out at border crossings. The crossing at Spin Boldak, Kandahar Province, is open 12 hours a day, and about 8,000 people pass through it every day. All children under age five, about 800 children a day, are immunized against polio by an Afghan team on one side of the border working in tandem with a Pakistani team on the other.

Dr. Arshad Qudous, of the World Health Organization, believes that a victory over polio in Afghanistan is possible, setting the target date for this achievement in late 2008. "It will be a historic victory," Qudous states, "and it will be a moment of

pride for Afghanistan that even in this difficult situation we can accomplish this thing." If Afghans could eradicate polio from their country in a time of war, what could they accomplish in a time of peace?

## A hard choice: Safety or literacy?

The movement of children back to school, which was gaining pace between 2002 and 2005, has now been stalled or, in some areas, reversed. Girls are particularly affected by the insurgents' targeting of girls' schools and even of the pupils themselves. According to the education ministry, at least a million girls of school age are not enrolled, 35 per cent of the

### CHILDREN BEHIND BARS

Maryam [not her real name] was engaged when she was 6 years old and married when she was 10. She is now 16 and locked up in the women's prison in Herat. "The conditions [in my husband's home] were so bad, with so many problems, that I escaped from the house and came to the city," she said. "After 20 days, I went to the authorities and explained the situation. They put me in prison because they said I was not a clean wife."

The juvenile detention centre in Herat is an overcrowded home for 12 girls and five infants. Few if any of the young prisoners of Herat would have been thought of in most countries as having committed a crime. Their imprisonment contravenes United Nations conventions, to which Afghanistan is a signatory. And their stories are strikingly similar.

They were engaged and forcibly married when they were children to men they did not know; two of these men were 78 and 80 years old. When the girls were abused and ill-treated, they ran away and were then imprisoned for bad behaviour. Some have been tried and sentenced, and others are on remand. In many cases, the accusation of a husband or uncle is enough to secure a conviction. At its worst, this is a practice of licensed child abuse.

total population of girls. There are often equal numbers of boys and girls in primary schools but four or five times as many boys in secondary schools. Even if the schools are not attacked, they are sometimes intimidated into closing by threats delivered in 'night letters' to teachers and parents.

The picture is especially bleak in the war-affected south. Few schools are open in the provinces of Helmand and Uruzgan. As a result of chronic poverty, armed conflict and the Taliban campaign against girls' education, literacy is as low as 2 per cent in some rural areas, the Ministry of Education reports. The hopes of 2002 have not been fulfilled. Sayed Rasul, a farmer who lives near a school attacked in June 2007, may have spoken for many

when he said, "It is better for my children to be alive, even if it means they must be illiterate."

Aware that the Taliban are using madrasas outside of Afghanistan as training schools for volunteers in the insurgency, the Afghan Government has taken a positive step to counter this by setting up 34 madrasas on its own territory and under its supervision. Forty per cent of the curriculum is dedicated to religious studies, 40 per cent to general education, and 20 per cent to English and computer studies.

Hanif Atmar, Minister of Education, says that education will reduce insecurity. He believes the establishment of these new schools will reduce the numbers of the Taliban by 50 per cent and suicide bombings by 95 per cent. As in all governments, education is a spending ministry. "When my colleagues see me," Mr. Atmar says, "they think 'Here comes someone who is going to be asking for more money'. When I see them, I think of their children."

Some of the most vulnerable victims of the war are the children who have fled from it, either with their parents or without them. Tides of destitute children have spilled into the cities. The government estimates there may be as many as 60,000 street children in the territory it controls, and more are expected as refugees from Iran and Pakistan return. Horror stories are coming from the border area near Herat about children being abused, trafficked and addicted to drugs.

The street children are not totally without help. The Aschiana Project, for example, is funded largely by the European Union and takes in 10,000 street children in Herat, Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif. These children lead a double life. In the shelter of Aschiana, they learn art and music, as well as carpentry and plumbing. But on the streets, it is a struggle for survival, and they earn their living by begging, selling or foraging for scraps of plastic and waste paper. To help raise desperately needed funds, the Aschiana centre sells the students' art. Nonetheless, funding for the project runs out at the end of 2007.

### CHILDREN OF THE FACTORY

The tented processing plant in Herat is one of the city's largest businesses. It employs 350 women, who work six days a week picking through goat hair to separate the finer strands. The end product is exported to Europe, where it is used to make everything from bedcovers to high-fashion clothing.

Many of the women are widows and former refugees who returned to the city after the Taliban fell. They are paid around 100 afghanis (US\$2) a day. Those with babies and infants bring them to work, and the space above the workers' floor is slung with hammocks for the very young. From the age of about seven, older children are expected to work alongside their mothers or make a living on the streets.

For many mothers, sending their children to school is out of the question. One woman, whose husband was killed in the war, said, "I can't send my daughter or sons to school because they have to work to feed the family." But another said, "My best wish is to be able to send my children to school ... We have nothing, but I wish our children to have what we did not."



## Conclusion

The children of Afghanistan have a greater stake in its future than anyone else. That future cannot be secured by the central government making plans for the provinces without involving the provinces in the planning. It cannot be secured by military means or by quick-fix projects implemented under the gun. Nor is it appropriate for soldiers working in Provincial Reconstruction Teams to be armed when they visit schools to reassure teachers and pupils about their security.

While the continuing commitment of donor nations is imperative whatever the short-term setbacks, a lasting settlement must be negotiated by the Afghans themselves. The citizens of Afghanistan must take ownership of policy and development. It makes no sense, for example, for outside contractors to build a top-of-the-line school when three simple but sufficient schools can be built by the Afghans for the same cost.

Things cannot go on as they have been. The Minister of Education says that it is “make or break” time for his country, especially for the children. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission identifies three critical areas for change to secure a better future for Afghanistan’s children: the war, the economy and children’s education.

The fighting and aerial bombardments in the south, sometimes at levels of high intensity, have not yet brought the greater security that was hoped for. Young people, like the former child soldiers of Kandahar, are being trained in skills they will be able to use only if there is a functioning economy for them to work in. The gains made in the enrolment of children in schools, from 1 million in 2001 to 6 million in 2006, are being turned back as schools are caught on the war’s front line, destroyed or intimidated into closure. And the repercussions could be as devastating as the direct attacks on the schools.

Afghanistan’s development is threatened by a new wave of illiteracy, with no one to teach the next generation, and rural areas in the south and east are especially disadvantaged. Catherine Mbengue, UNICEF’s Country Representative in Afghanistan, says, “If we don’t do what we should to ensure that the attacks stop, the positive gains we have made will be reversed.” The Government of Afghanistan is perceived by many Afghans as lacking the means or will to help them or even to control its own territory. The institutions of government are fragile, and the widespread conflict hampers aid and development. In a country also prone to natural disasters, Afghans are impatient that so little has been achieved for their children.

Despite the plans and proposals, projects and partnerships, millions of dollars poured into development aid and military support, the many countries working and fighting to bring peace and progress to Afghanistan – the Taliban are back in force, the insurgency is spreading, and the insecurity is countrywide. More schools are closing. More children are being killed. And families, especially in the southern provinces, are caught in the conflict, beyond the reach of humanitarian assistance.

It really is make or break time.

For further information on this *Child Alert*, contact [childalert@unicef.org](mailto:childalert@unicef.org)

For more information and multimedia features, please visit [www.unicef.org/childalert/afghanistan](http://www.unicef.org/childalert/afghanistan)

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