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Virginity or death for Afghan brides

RFE/RL (06.12.2015) - <http://goo.gl/hgdRCX> - Long-standing tradition holds that being a virgin is required for brides in Afghanistan, and they are expected to prove it.

One Afghan woman, speaking with RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan on condition of anonymity, says it is still customary in some areas of the country for in-laws to check for blood stains the morning after a wedding as proof of the bride's virginity.

Even being accused of having sex outside marriage can have dire consequences. Disgraced families have been known to demand that their "damaged" daughter-in-law be exchanged for her sister. Nonvirgins can be imprisoned in Afghanistan for adultery. And there are horrific tales of abuse, or worse.

"In some cases, a bride's ears and nose are cut off," says the Afghan woman. "They are forced into dirty clothes and taken back to her parent's home. Their heads are shaved. The bride's family is told that she is not a virgin. Other times, a bride is simply killed and her body is returned to her parents."

It's a discussion that is usually taboo in Afghanistan, but a recent spate of chilling public punishments of Afghan women accused of having premarital sex has brought the issue into the open.

In late November, a 26-year-old Afghan woman died of her injuries after being publicly lashed in the central province of Ghor. She had been accused of running away from home.

In October, 19-year-old Rokhsana was stoned to death by Taliban militants in the same province after having been accused of having premarital sex.

And in August, also in Ghor Province, a young man and woman found guilty of having sex outside marriage were lashed publicly.

Family Affair

The woman's own family is often behind the punishment, in some cases shunning the woman or handing her over to authorities for prosecution. But in the worst cases, her own kin can carry out honor killings.

"The existing culture among some families is that a ruined girl is given back to her family," Mariam Zurmati, a commissioner at the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, told RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan recently.

"In order to escape dishonor, that family will offer another of their daughters for marriage," she adds. "In some regions, women are simply killed. In some cases, even after years of marriage, a husband will abuse his wife."

Marzia, who only goes by one name, says her sister has endured years of abuse at the hands of her husband due to lingering suspicions that she was not a virgin when they married.

"I have a sister who didn't bleed when she got married," says Marzia, who is from Parwan Province. "Her husband beats her and she has bruises everywhere. Even after years of living together, he still abuses her and tells her she has been tarnished."

Even before the wedding, Afghan brides-to-be can be forcefully subjected to "virginity tests," in which doctors at government clinics test whether a woman's hymen is intact.

International human rights groups claim such tests contravene international law and are inconclusive in determining a women's sexual history.

Terena Yadgaari, a doctor in Kabul, agrees that virginity tests have no "medical validity," but notes that dozens of the examinations are carried out in government clinics in the capital every year.

So-called moral offenses, including adultery or even running away from home, are not considered crimes according to the Afghan Criminal Code. But hundreds of women and girls have nevertheless been imprisoned after being convicted of "immorality" by courts dominated by religious conservatives.

The Afghan Constitution prescribes that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam," but such rulings are at odds with more secular-minded passages in the constitution.

But in some rural areas, where Taliban militants exert considerable influence, residents often view government bodies as corrupt or unreliable and turn to Taliban courts to settle disputes.

The Taliban courts employ strict interpretations of Shari'a law, which prescribes death, or in other cases publicly flogging, for men or women found guilty of having a relationship outside marriage.

Afghanistan - Public stoning condemned

RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan (04.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1MRHqoY> - Afghan lawmakers have condemned and ordered an investigation into the stoning death of a young woman accused of adultery.

Lawmakers discussed the killing, which took place in the remote Ghor Province in late October, during a November 4 parliamentary session.

"As a representative of the Afghan people, I urge [the government] to hand over to the clutches of the law those behind this incident and the wild criminals who ruthlessly killed or stoned a woman to death," Shukria Paikan, a legislator from the northern province of Kunduz, said during the session.

The brutal death of 19-year-old Rukhshana was captured in a two-minute video obtained from an eyewitness by RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan. The video, an edited version of which was published this week, shows men identified as Taliban militants hurling stones at Rukhshana as she kneels in a hole in the ground, reciting an Islamic creed.

On October 25. The Afghan government blamed Taliban militants for the killing. Police said the woman, identified by the name Rokhshana, had fled her family with her fiance in a bid to find a place to be married. A local official said the militants accused the woman of having premarital sex. The video was provided to RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan.

The killing reportedly took place in Ghalmin, a village on the outskirts of Firoz Koh, the capital of Ghor Province.

Ghor Governor Sima Joyenda told RFE/RL on November 2 that the stoning was carried out by "Taliban, local religious leaders, and armed warlords" after Rukhshana was found

guilty of committing adultery. Joyenda said that her family had married her off against her will and that she was caught while eloping with a 23-year-old Mohammad Gul.

Gul was lashed for the same crime, according to local police.

Stoning 'Un-Islamic'

Najia Aimaq, a parliament member from the northern Baghlan Province, told fellow lawmakers that the stoning should have been prevented. "Those individuals who carry out such acts should be handed over to clutches of the law and should be punished," she said.

In a November 4 statement, the office of President Ashraf Ghani called the stoning "extra-judicial, un-Islamic, and criminal" and condemned the incident in the "strongest terms." The statement added that the president had assigned a delegation to "seriously investigate" the matter.

Rafiullah Bedar, a spokesman for Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission, told Shamshad TV on November 3 that the stoning was "un-Islamic."

The Taliban has been widely accused of carrying out the stoning, a punishment rarely seen in Afghanistan since Taliban rule ended. In 2010, Amnesty International reported what it called the "first confirmed stoning in the country since the fall of the Taliban in 2001." In that case, a **couple accused of adultery was** stoned to death in a public execution in Kunduz Province.

Did The Taliban Do It?

Local police official Mohammad Zaman Azimi has said the stoning was carried out by the Taliban, as did Masooma Anwari, the head of women's affairs in Ghor.

But some, including activist Wazhma Frogh, co-founder of the Research Institute for Women, Peace and Security, are skeptical. "We are told elders did this!" Frogh wrote in a November 3 tweet. "Not defending any atrocities of Ts [the Taliban] but if done by elders then we're covering up a crime."

Joyenda -- the female governor of Ghor who has been the target of death threats, protests calling for her ouster, and outside criticism after a young couple was lashed in her province recently -- stressed that the village where the stoning occurred was controlled by the Taliban.

The provincial government's power extends little beyond Firoz Koh. Dozens of illegal, armed groups run by former warlords and militia leaders are active in Ghor, a key transit route for arms and drugs, and the resulting clashes are seen to be the source of much of the violence in the province.

The war in Afghanistan is often used as cover for a wide range of crimes, including revenge killings, kidnapping for ransom, and extortion.

Harsh Justice

The Taliban is also not a homogenous group. Afghan officials have used the name to label hostile former warlords, religious leaders, and tribal elders.

Capital punishment was widely practiced by the Taliban regime, which ruled much of the country from 1996-2001. Convicted adulterers were routinely shot or stoned in executions conducted in front of large crowds.

In rural areas, where Taliban militants exert considerable influence, some Afghans still turn to Taliban courts to settle disputes because they consider government bodies to be corrupt or unreliable. The Taliban courts employ strict interpretations of Shari'a law, which prescribes punishments such as stoning and executions.

The Afghan Constitution considers Islam to be the "religion of the state" and says that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam."

The stoning of convicted adulterers is banned under Afghan law. However, in many areas controlled by the Taliban, it is not uncommon for men or women found guilty of having a relationship outside marriage to be sentenced to death, or publicly flogged.

Taliban militants stone woman to death in Afghanistan

RFE/RL (03.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1SkXyOp> - Afghan officials say the Taliban has stoned to death a 19-year-old woman in the city of Firoz-Koh in Ghor Province.

Local police official Mohammad Zaman Azimi told RFE/RL on October 26 that the woman, identified only as Rokhshana, was killed the previous day. Her fiancé, a 23-year-old man named Mohammad Gul, was reportedly lashed.

The couple allegedly had fled their families in a bid to find a place to be married.

Masooma Anwari, head of women's affairs in Ghor Province, expressed grave concern over the situation of women in the province.

She said the incompetence of the local government has paved the way for such incidents.

Afghanistan – Woman & man flogged in public – 100 lashes - for alleged adultery

Provincial police confirmed execution of the sentence adding measures were in place to safeguard the event

RAWA News (01.09.2015) - <http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2015/09/01/man-woman-face-lashes-in-western-afghanistan-for-adultery.html> -

An Afghan man and a woman received 100 lashes each after they were found guilty of committing adultery in western Ghor province.

The punishment was given in public on Monday and after they were found guilty in a primary court.

Judges said that the punishment was based on Sharia laws and that the man and woman confessed that they had sexual relations.

The man and woman were hit by a leather whip but did not appear to yell.

Provincial police confirmed execution of the sentence adding measures were in place to safeguard the event.

See video at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-amnesty-condemns-lashes-for-adultery/27223175.html>

Cleric gets 20 year sentence for rape of 10 year old girl – landmark case hailed by women

CNN (27.10.2014) <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/26/world/asia/afghan-girl-rape/index.html> - A 10-year-old girl, brutally raped, confronts her attacker in court.

The culprit -- a cleric -- tries to pass it off as "consensual sex."

A judge sentences him to 20 years and some \$30,000 in fines.

What's extraordinary is that these scenes played out Saturday in a courtroom in Kabul, Afghanistan.

The case is being hailed by women's rights groups and activists as a watershed moment, in a country where women are still the targets of violence, despite reforms since the fall of the Taliban in 2001.

"This case shows the level of cruelty that children in Afghanistan face," said Horia Mosadiq, an Afghanistan researcher with Amnesty International. "This is not an isolated case."

What's unusual about this case is that the victim had the courage to step forward, said Naheed Samadi Bahram, program director for Women for Afghan Women, or WAW, an international women's rights organization helping with the case.

A little young girl from a far province gets justice for herself, this is amazing. This is a success for human rights in the country.

"It makes us believe and trust more in the justice system in the country," Bahram said, speaking to CNN by phone from Kabul. "A little young girl from a far province gets justice for herself, this is amazing. This is a success for human rights in the country".

A hateful crime

The rape occurred in May, in the girl's village in Kunduz, in northern Afghanistan, according to media reports.

The group sheltered the victim and helped her family navigate the legal process.

This is their account of what happened:

The perpetrator, Mullah Mohammad Amin, was a local mullah who taught the girls religious studies.

One day in May, the mullah asked three girls to stay behind after classes to help clean the mosque.

When they were about to leave, he asked the victim to stay. He then tied her hands, taped her mouth and raped her.

She went home and was later examined by a doctor, who confirmed the rape.

The police were informed and the mullah was arrested.

The girl stayed at the WAW women's shelter for a few days and was then sent to Kabul for treatment.

Amin was prosecuted under the Elimination of Violence against Women law, passed in 2009.

While the law has been on the books for the past few years, it had not been strongly implemented, Najia Nasim, country director for WAW, told CNN from Kabul.

"To seek justice for these cases is unusual. They are normally not reported; even if they are reported they are not followed up. The women don't want to bring shame to their family. Some are not aware of the law; others don't trust the government."

Patti Gossman, a senior researcher on Afghanistan at Human Rights Watch, agreed that it is uncommon for rape cases to get this far.

The welcome step in this case is that the judge did not charge the child.
Patti Gossman, HRW

"It's quite unusual that she would bring this case," Gossman said. "Most women would be afraid."

There was also concern, when this case surfaced, about honor killings, she said.

Dramatic courtroom testimony

On Saturday, the victim showed up at the Kabul courtroom accompanied by her father and uncle, said Bahram, who attended the proceedings in Kabul.

The trial lasted nearly two hours, she said.

The mullah sat on the floor, shackled with chains attached to handcuffs, Bahram said, while his young victim kept her face covered with a scarf.

She wept most of the time, Bahram said.

The trial began with the mullah's two defense attorneys reading his statement given to police after his arrest, in which the cleric admitted to having sex with the girl. The lawyers tried to persuade the court that the sex was consensual and that he should be given only 100 lashes as punishment, Bahram said.

Judge Sulaiman Rasouli rejected that argument because it would mean lashing the girl too and treating her as an adulterer rather than a rape victim, according to news reports.

When Amin, speaking in his own defense, said the victim had seduced him, the girl reacted strongly.

"You are a liar... I never loved you... you forced me to do this, you ruined my life... God will hate you for what you did to me, he will punish you," Bahram said, paraphrasing the victim.

The girl's father also spoke up in the court, saying he trusted his daughter and that she never lied, Bahram said.

"The welcome step in this case is that the judge did not charge the child," said Gossman. "In a country where there are several women and girls imprisoned for moral crimes, that's a positive."

The court sentenced the mullah to the maximum 20-year sentence.

Amin's lawyers are expected to appeal to try to reduce the sentence.

Victim still traumatized

The victim is still very traumatized and emotionally fragile, said Nasim, who met the girl Sunday.

"She's a very shy girl; she does not talk much, but when you ask her about the case she starts to cry," Nasim said.

In an interview with Afghanistan's TOLO news agency, her father, who is deaf, said he hopes the sentencing would dissuade other perpetrators from committing such crimes in the future.

"Justice should be preserved so others will send their children to mosques," he told TOLO.

"When family and victims raise their voice it is unusual, but luckily more and more families are speaking out," said Amnesty International's Mosadiq, who credits the hard work of women's rights groups for the legal victory.

"To some extent this is a victory, but we still have a long way to go."

President Karzai says stoning will not be reintroduced as punishment for adultery

RFE/RL (29.11.2013) - Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai says his government will not reintroduce stoning as a punishment for adultery.

Karzai was quoted as telling RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan: "It is not correct. The minister of justice has rejected it."

The brutal punishment of stoning was used during the rule of the Islamist Taliban regime, which was in power from the mid-1990s until the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001.

Earlier this week, Human Rights Watch urged Afghanistan to reject restoring stoning as a punishment.

In a statement, the group said "it is absolutely shocking that 12 years after the fall of the Taliban government, the Karzai administration might bring back stoning."

The group called on Karzai "to demonstrate at least a basic commitment to human rights and reject this proposal."

Stoning will not be brought back

Hamid Karzai's government backs away from reintroduction of brutal punishment after outcry

The Guardian (28.11.2013) -[Afghanistan's](#) government has backed away from [a proposal to reintroduce public stoning as a punishment for adultery](#) after the leak of a draft law stirred up a storm of international condemnation.

The president, [Hamid Karzai](#), said in an interview that the grim penalty, which became a symbol of [Taliban](#) brutality when the group were in power, would not be coming back.

"It is not correct. The minister of justice has rejected it," he told Radio Free Europe, days after the UK minister Justine Greening [urged him to prevent the penalty becoming law](#).

Afghanistan's penal code dates back over three decades. The government is drawing up a new one to unify fragmented rules and cover crimes missed out when the last version was written, such as money laundering, and offences that did not even exist at the time, such as internet crimes.

The justice minister presiding over the reform is an outspoken conservative who last year denounced the country's handful of shelters for battered women as brothels.

As part of the process, a committee tasked with looking at sharia law came up with draft legislation that would have condemned married adulterers to the slow and gruesome death; unmarried people who had sex would be flogged.

But after several days of silence in the face of growing international outcry, the justice ministry said in a statement that although stoning had been proposed it would not appear in the new legislation because there was "no need to regulate the issue".

The country's penal code already encompasses sharia law, but some controversial aspects of traditional punishments such as stoning have never been put on the books in Afghanistan.

"The legality of the crime and punishment is fully addressed and there is no need to regulate the issue in the new code. So, the ministry of justice does not intend to regulate it in the new draft code," the statement said.

Rights groups who first highlighted the draft law warned that although the government's quashing of the proposal was good news, its emergence in the first place was a sign of how fragile gains in human rights over the last decade had been, particularly for women.

Although stoning is listed as a punishment for adulterers of both sexes, in countries where it has been used in recent years women have often appeared on the execution ground alone.

As foreign troops head home before a 2014 deadline for the end of combat action in Afghanistan, and political attention fades with it, many activists fear that years of painstaking progress are at risk of being swept away.

"Of course it's a huge relief that the government appears eager to disown this proposal now, but this is not an aberration that appeared out of the blue," said Heather Barr of [Human Rights Watch](#).

"It is just the latest in a long string of efforts to roll back women's rights over the last half year, many of which have been successful. It is time for donors to wake up and realise that if there is not constant pressure on the Afghan government to respect women's rights, there will be no women's rights."

Indian author Sushmita Banerjee killed in Afghanistan by Taliban

Times of India (06.09.2013) - Indian author Sushmita Banerjee was killed by the [Taliban](#) late on Wednesday. While the reason for the barbaric act was not given, Banerjee had possibly attracted the ire of the fundamentalist outfit for her ceaseless social work, especially for women's healthcare and upliftment.

Forty-nine-year-old Banerjee, according to reports, was dragged out of her house in Kharana in Paktia province before being shot dead by the turbaned militants. The execution signals the portent of things to come before the impending withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan where deadly attacks and other forms of atrocities against women have spiralled in the past few months.

Banerjee, who had converted to Islam and rechristened herself as Sayeda Kamala, retained her Indian citizenship. Earlier too she had attracted the anger of the regressive Taliban. Her memoir about her dramatic escape from the clutches of the fundamentalist outfit inspired a movie in 2003, *Escape from Taliban*, starring Monisha Koirala.

Last month, a female Afghan MP was abducted by suspected Taliban militants while she was travelling with her children. Another woman MP recently sought asylum in Britain after being abandoned by her relatives for seeking divorce from an abusive husband. In July, gunmen assassinated a high profile female police officer. These instances have occurred in the backdrop of orthodox Muslim groups renewing their call against women stepping out of their homes to work or seek independent careers.

Indian officials in Kabul confirmed that Banerjee was shot around 11pm Wednesday and that her last rites were performed by her family Thursday morning. She had just returned to Afghanistan after celebrating Eid in West Bengal.

Married to an Afghan businessman, Jaanbaz Khan, Banerjee had recently moved back to Afghanistan after spending a few years in India, especially Kolkata and Mumbai. Her best-selling book, *Kababuliwalar Bangali Bou* (A Kabuliwala's Bengali Wife), was written in 1995 after she escaped from the clutches of the Taliban in the wake of the fall of Afghanistan to the marauding hordes.

Although a report claimed the Taliban denied any involvement in the killing, Afghan police said militants belonging to the extreme Islamist outfit descended on her Kharana house, tied up her husband and other family members before dragging Sushmita out and pumping several bullets into her from close range. After the cold-blooded execution, the Talibs dumped her body near an Islamic seminary, the police added.

Since returning to Afghanistan, Banerjee worked as a health worker in Paktia, recording on celluloid the lives of local women as part of her work. After her July 1988 marriage to Khan, who she had earlier met in Kolkata, Banerjee moved to Afghanistan when her

parents tried to get her divorced. All of 27 at that time, Banerjee was shocked to learn that Khan was already married to another woman. She took pity on Khan's first wife, Gulguti, and even reared her children besides adopting Tinni, daughter of her brother-in-law.

"Her publisher Swapan Biswas said Banerjee had informed him about the plan to return to Afghanistan in February to start work on another book. "She was determined to go back for the book which she wanted me to publish," Biswas said.

Besides the first book, Banerjee has recounted her remarkable escape story in an article for an Indian news magazine in 1998. She wrote that "life was tolerable until the Taliban crackdown in 1993" when militants ordered her to shut down the dispensary she ran from her house and "branded" her as a woman of "poor morals."

In Banerjee's words, she made an abortive bid to escape first in early 1994, but her brothers-in-law tracked her down to the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, where she had reached to seek assistance from the Indian embassy. They took her back to Afghanistan only to be confined by the Taliban in house arrest.

The Taliban promised to send her back to India, which never happened. Instead, they heaped insults on her and threatened her daily. That is when she made up her mind to escape. The daring move bore fruit in 1995 when she was able to hoodwink her captors, fleeing her husband's house which is three hours from Kabul.

Banerjee's execution does not bode well for Afghanistan's women, especially when their empowerment under the Hamid Karzai regime was held up as one of the greatest successes of the Nato coalition forces. Human rights groups operating in Afghanistan and abroad say that a string of laws passed by the parliament will expose women to extreme forms of abuse. The Islamists have been demanding shutting down of women's shelters which they describe as "dens of immorality".

Women activists slam government silence over schoolgirl murder

Tolo News (06.12.2012) - The Afghan Women's Network has condemned the killing of Kapisa schoolgirl, Anisa, who was shot dead allegedly by Taliban members on Sunday.

The activists criticised the government for its silence over the incident in a gathering in Kabul on Wednesday and called for a thorough investigation of the case.

"The silence of the government over the killing of a volunteer of the polio campaign in Kapisa province is very unfortunate. We want an urgent investigation of the incident by the government," head of the Afghan Women Network Hafifa Azim said at the gathering.

Anisa, a 16-year-old schoolgirl, was shot dead in a hail of bullets after leaving Mahmoud Raqi Girls High School on Sunday, according to the school and provincial officials.

Possible motives for the shooting have been linked to Anisa's work as a volunteer on a polio campaign, given the Taliban has publicly opposed polio vaccinations in some parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Several other speakers at the gathering including member of parliament Noor Zia Atmar called for the severest of punishments for those who planned and carried out the shooting.

"The government must find the facts and punish those behind this incident," Atmar said.

"It's very inhumane to kill someone who is performing a very prestigious and holy duty," Afghan High Peace Council Member Hawa Alam Noorsitani said.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Public Health has called for armed opposition groups not to harm the health workers.

"We strongly condemn the killing of this girl by the armed opposition groups and we urge them to be cooperative with the health workers," Public Health Deputy Minister Najia Tareq said.

The Taliban could not be contacted for comment on the matter.

US troops punished for Koran burning and urination video

BBC News (28.08.2012) - Six US soldiers have been disciplined for the incineration in February of up to 100 Korans and other religious texts in Afghanistan, the US military said.

They will not face criminal prosecution over the incident, which sparked rioting that claimed at least 30 lives and saw two US troops shot dead.

The investigation said there was no malicious intent to disrespect Islam.

Three US Marines were also disciplined for a video in which the bodies of dead Taliban fighters were urinated on.

For the Koran burning, the six soldiers face "administrative punishments" that could include measures like reduction of rank, extra duty or forfeiture of pay. They are four officers and two non-commissioned officers.

'Secret messages'

In the wake of the 20 February incident, Afghan President Hamid Karzai called for a public trial of the soldiers involved.

His office told the Associated Press news agency Mr Karzai would review the decisions and respond on Tuesday.

The findings showed that up to 100 Korans and other religious texts - a previously undisclosed figure - had been incinerated at Bagram Air Field, a US air base north of Kabul.

Some 53 Korans and 162 other religious books were recovered from the incinerator. All of these texts had been damaged by fire, and about one-third of them were "slightly damaged", according to the report.

They had been removed from the Parwan Detention Centre amid concerns that detainees were using the books to pass secret messages.

A translator was partly blamed in the report for apparently having suggested that most of the texts were extremist in nature, without instructing American forces how to properly dispose of the books.

The report added that warnings from Afghans, including an Afghan soldier, had been ignored - something the investigation attributed in part to distrust between the US troops and Afghans.

But Brigadier General Bryan Watson, the investigating officer, wrote: "I absolutely reject any suggestion that those involved acted with any malicious intent to disrespect the Koran or defame the faith of Islam."

The investigation's findings came on the same day the US Marine Corps announced its punishment for three servicemen who took part in a video in which the bodies of dead Taliban fighters were urinated on.

Three servicemen pleaded guilty: one to "urinating on the body of a deceased Taliban soldier", another to posing for a photo with human casualties, and a third for lying to investigators.

In the video, someone can be heard saying: "Have a good day, buddy."

Their identities have not been revealed and the Marine Corps said it would provide details of disciplinary actions against them at a later date.

11-year-old girl married to 40-year-old man

CNN (05.08.2012) - Before their wedding ceremony begins in rural Afghanistan, a 40-year-old man sits to be photographed with his 11-year-old bride. The girl tells the photographer that she is sad to be engaged because she had hoped to become a teacher. Her favorite class was Dari, the local language, before she had to leave her studies to get married.

She is one of the 51 million child brides around the world today. And it's not just Muslims; it happens across many cultures and regions.

Photographer Stephanie Sinclair has traveled the world taking pictures, like the one of the Afghan couple, to document the phenomenon. Christiane Amanpour spoke with Sinclair about a book which features her photographs called, "Questions without Answers: The World in Pictures by the Photographers of VII."

Amanpour asked Sinclair if the 11-year-old Afghan girl married in 2005, and others like her, consummate their marriages at such an early age. Sinclair says while many Afghans told her the men would wait until puberty, women pulled her aside to tell her that indeed the men do have sex with the prepubescent brides.

Sinclair has been working on the project for nearly a decade. She goes into the areas with help from people in these communities who want the practice to stop, because they see the harmful repercussions.

In Yemen, a similar picture. Tehani and Ghada are sisters-in-law photographed with their husbands, who are both members of the military. Like most of the girls, Tehani didn't even know she was getting married, until the wedding night. She was six years old.

Tehani describes how she entered the marriage, "They were decorating my hands, but I didn't know they were going to marry me off. Then my mother came in and said, 'Come on my daughter.' They were dressing me up and I was asking, 'Where are you taking me?'"

Sinclair says, "This harmful, traditional practice of child marriage is just so embedded in some of these cultures that the families don't protect them as they should."

The subjects do know they're being photographed and Sinclair tells them the topic she is working on. She does tell them that there is teen pregnancy in places like the U.S., but for the societies she's photographing it's even worse that 13-year-old girls are pregnant and unmarried.

Another one of the photographs Sinclair took is of a Yemeni girl named Nujood Ali. In a rare turn of events, Ali managed to get a divorce at age 10.

"A couple months after she was married, she went to the court and found a lawyer – a woman named Shada Nasser and asked her to help her get a divorce, and she was granted [it]," Sinclair says. "It's definitely rare and Nujood became kind of an international symbol of child marriage, because she was able to do this. And I think she's inspired a lot of other girls and other organizations to support these girls, to have a stronger voice."

Sinclair has documented the practice outside of the Muslim world. In a Christian community in Ethiopia, she captured the image of a 14 year-old girl named Leyualem in a scene that looks like an abduction. Leyualem was whisked away on a mule with a sheet covering up her face. Sinclair asked the groomsmen why they covered her up; they said it was so she would not be able to find her way back home, if she wanted to escape the marriage.

Sinclair travelled to India and Nepal, and photographed child marriages among some Hindus.

A five-year-old Hindu girl named Rajni was married under cover of night: "Literally at four o'clock in the morning. And her two older sisters were married to two other boys," Sinclair says. "Often you see these group marriages because the girl and the families can't afford to have three weddings." In the five-year-old girl's case, Rajni will continue to live with her own family for several years.

Girls aren't always the only ones forced into marriage. Sinclair wanted to photograph child marriages in India and Nepal, because sometimes the boys entering a marriage are also young. "And often they're victims just as much of this harmful traditional practice," she says.

Sinclair told Amanpour that she hopes her photographs would not only highlight the problems to westerners, but also show people in the areas where this takes place that if

the girls continue to be taken out of the population to forcibly work at home, that their communities suffer as a whole.

"It's a harmful traditional practice that is slowly changing. We just want to have it change even faster."

Woman's public execution for alleged adultery

By Hamid Shalizi

Reuters (08.07.2012) - Sayed Jalal furrowed his eyebrows in anger as he vowed to avenge the public execution of a woman in front of a large crowd not far from Kabul, brazen violence that spurred shock and sharp condemnation from Afghan authorities and the United States.

The Taliban denied involvement in the killing in Parwan province, in which an unnamed woman's head and body were riddled with bullets at close range in punishment for alleged adultery.

Authorities in Kabul directly blamed the Islamist group.

"We will take revenge for this. Their brutality and such inhumane acts are why we hate the Taliban," said the 42-year-old shopkeeper in Charikar, provincial capital of Parwan about 25 km (15 miles) south of Shinwari, where the killing took place.

The execution was recorded in a three-minute video, obtained by Reuters, which shows a woman in a shawl being repeatedly shot in front of around 150 men perched on a hill, who cheer and praise the attackers, calling them "mujahideen", a term the Taliban call themselves.

NATO's top commander in Afghanistan, U.S. General John Allen, called the killing "an atrocity of unspeakable cruelty".

Others in Charikar, from where a dirt road leads to Shinwari through rough terrain, lamented what they described as the Taliban's increasing sway over their once relatively peaceful area, about an hour's drive west from Kabul.

"The Taliban are creating fear and trying to rule us through terrorism but they will never succeed," said Charikar resident Najibullah, 30, prompting approving nods from a crowd of men who had formed around him in a busy outdoor market.

The Taliban dismissed the claims: "We have no operational update about this," spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said. Parwan's governor Basir Salangi said the Taliban carried out the killing in his province eight days ago.

Despite the presence of over 130,000 foreign troops and 300,000 Afghan soldiers and police, the Taliban have managed to resurge beyond their traditional bastions of the south and east, extending their reach into once more peaceful areas like Parwan.

"This was a brutal act against the Afghan people by the Taliban," Interior Ministry spokesman Sediq Seddiqi said.

"They will be punished as they were punished 10 years ago and we will continue our struggle to eliminate them," he told Reuters, referring to their ousting from power in late 2001 by U.S.-backed Afghan forces after an austere five-year rule.

The condemnation came on the day of a major donors' summit in Tokyo, where \$16 billion in development aid was pledged for Afghanistan over the next four years as they try to prevent it from sliding back into chaos once most foreign troops have left by the end of 2014.

In a declaration by summit participants, the importance of promoting women's rights was stressed repeatedly.

The U.S. embassy in Kabul, condemning the public execution in the "strongest possible terms", said the hard-won gains of Afghan women made in the last 10 years must be protected.

But Shah Jahan Yazdanparast, head of women's affairs in Parwan, which is connected to the Kabul ministry, said such naked violence as the woman's execution "will only increase our fear and concern as women in Afghanistan".

Afghan women have won back basic rights in education, voting and work since the Taliban were ousted from power but fears are mounting both at home and abroad that such freedoms could be traded away as Kabul seeks peace talks with the group.

"Afghan women and girls were looking to the international community to protect the progress they have made in the last decade and they have been let down," Oxfam Afghanistan's head of policy and advocacy, Louise Hancock, said on Sunday after the close of the Tokyo summit.

Violence against women has increased sharply in the past year, according to Afghanistan's independent human rights commission. Activists say there is waning interest in women's rights on the part of President Hamid Karzai's government.

Authorities blamed the Taliban for the stoning to death of a young couple in northern Kunduz province two years ago in a crowded bazaar, days after a pregnant widow was flogged and killed in western Baghdis province. The Taliban denied involvement.

Where Afghan humanitarianism ends and development begins

UNAMA (30.01.12) - Afghanistan suffers from cyclical natural disasters - floods and drought - which affect people annually and require expensive emergency responses, but their impacts could well be avoided, or at least mitigated, if proper water management systems or dams were built, for example.

Some farmers could switch from rain-fed wheat crops, which require a lot of water, to other crops, like grapes or almonds. But these kinds of transitions require long-term multi-year plans, inherently at odds with emergency responses, based on annual appeals for funding.

"Responding to eight droughts in 11 years makes no sense," Michael Keating, the UN humanitarian coordinator in Afghanistan, said recently. "There is something going wrong."

"It is not a complete mystery how some of these problems can be addressed," Keating told IRIN. "They shouldn't be addressed by basic emergency humanitarian action."

And yet, for much of the past decade, humanitarians have been drawn into things like infrastructure and early recovery programmes.

"A lot of humanitarian assistance has been partly diverted from its objective," said Laurent Saillard, head of the European Commission's humanitarian aid arm (ECHO) in Afghanistan. "Instead of being used for what it's supposed to be used for - life-saving emergency interventions - it is trying to address chronic poverty, and of course, at the end of the day, not achieving sustainable results."

Over the past 10 years, a cumulative US\$3.2 billion has been spent in Afghanistan on programmes outlined in the international community's annual appeals for humanitarian funding - the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP). The CAP is estimated to account for only half of all humanitarian funding.

"[There is] frustration from the population which receives the assistance [because it] is not exactly what they need... frustration from the implementing agencies, [who] realize that they have been present for 10 years, repeating all sorts of interventions, and yet they have not addressed the problem... and frustration from the donors, [who] feel that the money is being wasted, in a way," Saillard told IRIN.

This year's drought - affecting 2.8 million people - brought the problem to new heights: "That is a scale that is simply not sustainable," said Aidan O'Leary, the head of OCHA in Afghanistan.

"At the end of the day, humanitarian actors can only ever bring emergency relief," he added. "We cannot bring solutions. [People] want houses, roads, livelihoods. Humanitarian actors can't deliver that. They're never going to be able to deliver that."

New approach

This year's CAP, launched in Kabul on 28 January, aims to "go back to basics" by focusing on more strictly humanitarian needs. "If you make the field too broad, you can't get anything done," O'Leary told IRIN.

The international humanitarian community has requested one quarter less than last year, even though humanitarian needs are increasing. It has asked for \$437 million to help 8.8 million Afghans, including help for civilians affected by armed conflict, initial assistance for refugees and internally displaced people returning to their areas of origin, and life-saving actions for those affected by natural disasters.

This excludes projects for the "chronically vulnerable populations" - a task deemed better left to development actors.

How we got here

Much of the problem, aid workers say, lies in the fact that the billions of dollars in development aid invested in the country over the last decade have not been spent cohesively or based on needs, but rather driven by short-term political and military aims.

Around \$57 billion dollars of development assistance have been spent in Afghanistan since 2001, and yet 10 million people are still living on the edge, Keating said.

"That does raise the question: Have the investments been equitable? Is the money being used in a way that helps these communities reduce their vulnerability and doesn't expose them to repeated humanitarian crisis?"

Falling through the cracks

Nor has the government provided the answer, aid workers say. Saillard argues the humanitarian community is partly to blame in allowing the government to defer its responsibilities, often under the guise of lack of capacity. "The fact that there is this presence keeps the right actors sometimes outside the game," he noted.

But the minister of rural rehabilitation and development, Jarullah Mansoori, argues that with its budget of \$500 million per year, his ministry has made great strides in building communities' resilience to shocks and in managing the impacts of disasters.

It has created a central coordinating body, the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority; has dug irrigation canals; encouraged rural enterprise development; and improved access to health and education in rural areas. The ministry's flagship National Solidarity Programme has been credited with reaching the local level with cash-for-work or cash-for-assets programmes.

"If you compare the damage of disasters eight years ago to... now, you will see a lot of differences," the minister told IRIN. "But still, since this country went through more than three decades of very damaging and destructive war and crisis, it needs a lot of effort in every aspect."

Other aid workers say mitigation projects, like flood protection walls, have fallen through the cracks. They are not a central part of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, which the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan is mandated to support; nor are they technically part of OCHA's mandate. The UN Development Programme (UNDP), which might traditionally take on such projects, has been focused on improving governance and reducing poverty, and is scaling back its direct presence across the country in order to increasingly work through the government.

"Disaster risk reduction is almost non-existent," said one development worker. "I've noticed that gap. There's very little proactive work done here. It's all reactive."

Dialogue

Another part of the problem has been a lack of understanding of what exactly "humanitarian" means and where the line is drawn. "It's quite blurred," as one field worker put it. "Is one activity development or humanitarian?"

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has been dealing with this question for years, as refugees returning from Iran and Pakistan - given an initial humanitarian assistance - struggle to integrate in the longer term.

"Where does humanitarian assistance stop and where does development aid begin?" Suzanne Murray Jones, a senior adviser at UNHCR, has been asking herself. "How do we bridge the gap?"

Part of the answer, she said, is a greater dialogue between humanitarian and development partners to encourage development investments in the same areas where people are returning en masse.

"We know nothing about development of livelihoods or about large-scale agriculture. It's not our expertise. It's for the FAOs or ILOs to go to these sites and say this is what's needed," she said, in reference to the Food and Agriculture Organization and the International Labour Organization. "It's getting the synergy together to work together."

To that end, humanitarian actors now participate in monthly meetings of the heads of developmental agencies to try to flag issues of concern, and O'Leary is increasingly advocating development.

"We have to be more vocal," he said. "I have no interest in having humanitarians indefinitely here in Afghanistan. We have to be looking for our exit strategy. That involves a peace process and development actors developing the key issues. Is it going to take decades? Yes. But it has to be on the agenda now."

Gaps

In the meantime, as humanitarians try to return to their more traditional role, they find themselves in a tricky position. Keating recalls an informal settlement he visited in Kabul where people were living with "nothing".

"You can't respond on a humanitarian basis endlessly, and yet there is no development activity that we could perceive to address their needs," he said. "They're falling between two stools. I suspect that is true of a very large number of people in rural areas as well."

Aid workers acknowledge that pulling back could lead to holes in coverage. But for Saillard, it might be a necessary evil. "Sometimes you have to create gaps for the right actors to wake up and take their responsibilities seriously," he said.

Systematic torture in Afghanistan's internationally funded detention centres

Written Parliamentary Question by MEP Pino Arlacchi

EP (10.11.2011) - According to a United Nations report released on 10 October 2011, the use of torture on prisoners is 'systematic' in Afghanistan.

The UN report is the most comprehensive look at the Afghan detention system to date. It paints a devastating picture of abuses perpetrated during interrogations by Afghan intelligence and police officials, even though US and EU donors provide training and pay for nearly the entire budget of the Afghan ministries running the detention centres.

The report does not assess whether international officials knew of the abuses; but since it is difficult to believe that the foreign funds intended for the Afghanistan detention centres have been disbursed with total lack of control and oversight, such widespread use of torture raises serious questions about potential complicity or carelessness by international officials.

1. Is the Vice-President/High Representative aware of the abhorrent violation of human rights denounced by the UN report?
2. How does the Vice-President/High Representative intend to proceed in order to rectify what is a clear lack of supervision of the funds concerned or, at worst, possible external complicity in acts of torture and mistreatment of Afghan detainees?

Answer given by High Representative/Vice-President Ashton on behalf of the Commission, 20 December 2011

The European Union has taken careful note of the UN report regarding the mistreatment of detainees in certain detention facilities of the National Directorate of Security and Afghan National Police and issued a statement on 10 October 2011(1).

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan has made it clear that the report does not conclude that the ill-treatment encountered is part of a systematic policy by the authorities. They have also stated that the Government is taking the allegations seriously and is seeking to establish mechanisms to avoid future abuses.

Governance and Rule of Law are focal areas of EU support for Afghanistan and are, therefore, key elements in the dialogue with the Government. In particular, the EU has supported the Ministry of Justice in overseeing the Central Prisons Department (CPD).

This responsibility is now being transferred to the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and the EU, in cooperation with the international community, is working closely with the Afghan authorities to ensure that suitable checks and balances remain in place once the CPD falls fully under MoI responsibility.

This includes a reform of the prison law and ensuring that the rights of persons in detention are protected. Of particular importance in this respect is protection of underage detainees and measures to ensure that detainees in general are protected from physical and psychological abuse. The EU will continue to follow the situation of Afghan prisoners closely and will raise the issue with the Government of Afghanistan whenever appropriate in order to ensure that international law is upheld and enforced.

EU assistance for capacity building activities with the police takes a human rights-based approach. Furthermore, in regard to EUPOL Afghanistan, human rights are a cross-cutting issue in its police mentoring tasks and cooperation with the Ministry of Justice and prosecutors. EUPOL cooperates directly with the Afghan Human Rights Commission.

The EU also continues to fund Afghan civil society, including under the EIDHR. It stands ready to use its assistance instruments to help the government address human rights abuses in a timely fashion.

The European hospital of Kabul

Written Parliamentary Question by MEP Thijs Behrman

EP (31.10.2011) - The French Medical Institute for Children (FMIC), launched in 2005 in Kabul on the initiative of French medical NGO La Chaîne de l'Espoir, is participating in the international community's reconstruction efforts and efforts to improve access to care for Afghan people. Based on a public-private partnership between the French and Afghan governments, the Aga Khan Development Network and La Chaîne de l'Espoir, the FMIC is currently developing its healthcare offer, with the establishment of a gynaecology and obstetrics service that should start by 2012, and the integration in the future of an academic and tertiary centre for medical sciences, eventually turning the FMIC into a fully-fledged academic hospital centre for both adults and children. The FMIC distinguishes itself not only by the high level of quality of healthcare provided to patients (ISO 9001 certificate) and the variety of services offered, but also by the fact that it enables a fruitful transfer of knowledge and know-how to the benefit of the 457 Afghan members of staff, thereby sustaining the policy of 'Afghanistan' necessary for a true and sustained development of the country.

1. Given the importance of the objectives pursued and the already well-established European representativeness of the staff working there, would the Commission agree to turn the FMIC into an EU project, which would enhance the visibility of EU action on the international scene in general, and in Afghanistan especially?

2. Given the fact that the Commission is a well-recognised key stakeholder in the medical field (major founder of the main two national programmes, Basic Package Health Services and Essential Package Hospital Services), does it intend to include tertiary healthcare in its next Country Strategy Paper, as the focus has been so far only on primary and secondary healthcare, and as there is a need to link all levels of healthcare?

3. Would the Commission agree to establish a shared financing based on Member States' contribution to care units (on the basis of the existing French model for instance), and on the Commission's contribution to transversal units (e.g. laboratory, administration, training, etc.)?

Answer given by Mr Piebalgs on behalf of the Commission, 15 December 2011

The Commission is aware of the quality of the work done by the French Medical Institute for Children (FMIC) in Kabul in contributing to improving Afghan access to medical care, in particular for children.

1. As regards the possibility of EU funding for the FMIC, EU support to projects is granted through transparent competitive procedures (calls for proposals). Furthermore, the parameters of the current EU assistance programme for Afghanistan were agreed with the Government of Afghanistan in 2010 and coordinated with other donors. EU support to the health sector in Afghanistan is implemented through (i) technical assistance and capacity building to the Ministry of Public Health, provided through service contracts and (ii) support the Basic and Essential Health Packages (BPHS and EPHS) in 10 provinces, through grants to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) following the publication of specific calls for proposals. For additional details on the implementation of the EU-Afghanistan Country Strategy Paper (CSP) 2007-2013 and Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) 2011-2013, the Honourable Member's are invited to consult the EU-Afghanistan State of Play which is updated bi-annually(1). This Programme is being implemented and there are no additional EU funds available.

2. The next EU-Afghanistan Country Strategy Paper (2014-2020) and related respective programming documents (and underlying legal bases, which are still being designed) will be in line with aid effectiveness principles and the EU's and international community's commitments towards the Government of Afghanistan (the Kabul Process). These include using country systems, to the extent possible, and supporting robust sector strategies and government-led donor coordination. If health continues to be identified in future as a core sector for EU support, support to tertiary healthcare will be an integral part thereof.

3. Actions falling within the framework of the new Multiannual Financial Framework (2014-2020) will have to be agreed upon in line with the respective legal base. Under the principles of division of labour, individual Member States may consider bilateral support for sectors, in coordination with EU support and that of other donors.

Prisoners in Afghanistan

Written Parliamentary Question by MEP Thijs Behrman

EP (19.09.2011) - Yesterday it was reported that the UN is to publish a report on torture in Afghan jails. The report alleges that in some prisons detainees have been

systematically beaten and given electric shocks and suggests that as a result NATO will be asked to suspend prisoner transfers to some facilities.

The human rights organisation Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission has corroborated these allegations, claiming that almost all prisoners in custody are tortured on a daily basis to make them confess.

Is the High Representative aware of these allegations?

What is the High Representative doing in the context of the EU's human rights strategy and of its relations with the Afghan authorities to protect these prisoners' human rights? How does the High Representative intend to respond to these alarming allegations, with specific reference to EU policies in Afghanistan?

Answer given by High Representative/Vice-President Ashton on behalf of the Commission, 9 January 2012

The EU is aware of the United Nations' report on the treatment of prisoners in Afghan jails.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan has made it clear that the report does not conclude that the ill-treatment encountered is part of a systematic policy by the authorities. They have also stated that the Government is taking the allegations seriously and is seeking to establish mechanisms to avoid future abuses.

The EU will continue to follow the situation of Afghan prisoners closely and will bring up the issue with the Government of Afghanistan whenever appropriate.

Governance and Rule of Law are focal areas of EU support to Afghanistan and are, therefore, key elements in the dialogue with the Government. In particular, the EU has supported the Ministry of Justice in overseeing the Central Prisons Department (CPD). This responsibility is now being transferred to the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and the EU, in cooperation with the international community, is working closely with the Afghan authorities to ensure that suitable checks and balances remain in place once the CPD falls fully under MoI responsibility. This includes a reform of the prison law and ensuring that the rights of persons in detention are protected.

Moreover, EU assistance for capacity building activities with the police takes a human rights-based approach. Furthermore, in regard to EUPOL Afghanistan, human rights are a cross-cutting issue in its tasks related to police mentoring, cooperation with the Ministry of Justice and prosecutors. EUPOL also cooperates directly with the Afghan Human Rights Commission. The EU also continues to fund Afghan civil society, including under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). It stands ready to use its assistance instruments to help the government to address human rights abuses in a timely fashion.

The Commission, via its humanitarian aid department, is funding the International Red Cross Committee (ICRC) which mandate includes notably the protection of detainees. ICRC's action aims at guaranteeing that all detainees are held only in recognised places of detention where material conditions and rules of detainees' management conform to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) or other internationally recognised standards. One of ICRC's main tasks under this action is to ensure that conditions of detention are satisfactory.

Filling classes with learning, not fears

NY Times (09.06.11) - Taliban insurgents are attacking fewer schools, easing the way for boys and girls to attend in larger numbers, even in largely insecure areas of the country, Afghan education officials say.

Since March 21, the beginning the Afghan calendar year, education officials have recorded 20 school-related attacks, said Gul Agha Ahmadi, a spokesman for the Ministry of Education. Attacks can include the burning of schoolhouses, kidnappings, threats, forced school closings and the killing or injuring of students or teachers. One headmaster has been killed so far.

While still gloomy, the numbers are down to an average of about eight a month, less than half the monthly average recorded by the ministry the previous two years. A United Nations-led task force on children and armed conflict recorded an average of nearly 50 attacks a month the previous two years, reflecting starkly different methods of reporting. Task force officials could not verify the numbers reported by the ministry since March, but Unicef, a task force member, confirmed that attacks were down this year, without providing specific numbers. Interviews with school administrators in some of the most volatile parts of the country also indicate a considerable decline.

Officials and aid groups say it is too soon to know whether the decrease is a signal of a permanent shift. But the drop is a hopeful sign as the United States and Afghanistan explore peace talks with the Taliban, and may show an effort on the part of the insurgents to portray a more moderate image as those talks continue, even as violence has escalated across the country.

What accounts for the decrease — whether improved security, a shift in Taliban philosophy or some combination of factors — is a matter of debate. Mullah Muhammad Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban, is believed to have issued a decree in March forbidding his fighters to attack schools and intimidate schoolchildren. Education Ministry officials and aid groups say they welcome the decree, though none of them have ever actually seen it.

Ghulam Farooq Wardak, the minister of education, credits efforts to convince communities, their elders and their religious leaders that education is vital to the country's future.

"These are arguments that have gained a lot of momentum within the communities," he said. "And the communities are in a very strong position to argue with those who are behind the closing of the schools."

A Taliban spokesman could not be reached for comment.

Mullah Omar has supposedly issued such edicts in the past, but they appear to have gone ignored, perhaps signaling a disconnect among the far-flung and loosely affiliated insurgent groups that commonly fall under the umbrella term of the Taliban.

Child protection advocates are reacting cautiously to the fall-off in attacks, because while the numbers may be down, the attacks have not stopped. Last month, a school principal was killed just outside of Kabul, apparently for spurning insurgent demands to stop teaching girls. Some 400 schools, meanwhile, remain closed for security reasons, mainly in the southern Pashtun belt stretching from Helmand Province through Kandahar and up to Paktika Province, according to the Education Ministry.

Peter Crowley, the country representative for Unicef, which monitors school attacks, said that while there were initial indications of a decrease, "it is too early to describe this as a trend."

About 8.3 million children — nearly 40 percent of them girls — were enrolled this year, up from 7.6 million last year, officials said. But various estimates show more than 4 million school-age children still not in classrooms for a variety of economic, social and security reasons.

Even before Mullah Omar was reported to have made his March decree, insurgents were singling out fewer schools and sending out fewer "night letters," the threatening notices the Taliban often paste to school doors ordering the schools closed or dictating the curriculum, officials said.

"Since the inception of the school year we have not had any threats or attacks," said Muhammad Qasam Popal, provincial director of education in the southern province of Oruzgan. The school year begins in September. The apparent cease-fire on schools, if there is one, has allowed officials there to reopen schools in volatile districts like Shahid Ehsas, Gizab and Dehrawoot, Mr. Qasam said.

In Helmand Province, one of the most violent in the country, people are now donating land to build schools, buoyed by the belief that the Taliban will not object, said Muhammad Naseem Safai, director of the Helmand Education Department. "We've opened 50 new schools across Helmand this school year, especially in those volatile districts," he said. Twenty of the schools were built on donated land, he added.

Parents are also worrying less

"When I heard about this announcement I felt relieved, really relieved," said Khali Ahmad, who owns a stationery shop in Kandahar and has two sons and a daughter in school. "The danger and threats I felt for my children in school were removed from my mind at once."

Sayed Ruhullah Agha, provincial deputy for education for Kandahar Province, said that sentiment was felt across the province.

"It actually had a positive effect throughout the Kandahar population," Mr. Agha said. "Since issuing the decree, we haven't experienced any attacks against schools, like burning them down or bombing them."

The decrease in attacks is notable in Kandahar, which had become notorious for attacks on schools, and girls' schools in particular. One of the most horrific happened on Nov. 12, 2008, when men on motorcycles sprayed girls and teachers with acid as they walked to a girls' school. The men hit 11 girls and 4 teachers, sending 6 to the hospital and leaving many of them with lifelong scars.

Banning girls from school was one of the more infamous symbols of the Taliban's rule from 1996 to 2001. More recently, thousands of young men waving Taliban flags and shouting slogans honoring Mullah Omar rampaged through Kandahar. The protests, in early April, erupted after a Florida pastor burned a Koran, but among the buildings the rioters singled out was the Zarghona Ana High School For Girls, setting it ablaze while the students hid in the bathroom.

And on Wednesday, about 30 men claiming to be arbeki, a traditional form of a village defense force, stormed a school for girls in the northern city of Kunduz, assaulting the headmaster and the principal with the butts of their rifles, said Mohammad Zahir Nazam, head of the Kunduz Education Department. Both men were left in a coma, Mr. Nazam

said. But neither this attack nor the Kandahar riot could be strictly attributed to the Taliban.

Mr. Nazam said the attackers in Kunduz were trying to collect taxes from residents when the headmaster and the principal objected, prompting the militia group to attack them.

Whether the Taliban has slowed its attacks out of consideration of the peace process or in an effort to fortify support among the population is an open question. Of one thing Mr. Ahmadi, the ministry spokesman, feels certain:

"If the Taliban wants to close a school in this country, they can do it," he said. "But they are not doing it, and it proves they don't want to."

Child labour in Afghanistan

Written Parliamentary Question by MEP Thijs Behrman

EP (27.04.2011) - On 15 March 2011 the New York Times published an article 'In Afghan Kilns, a Cycle of Debt and Servitude' by Michael Kamber. This refers to the issue of child labour in the brick industry in Afghanistan, where children are being forced to work to pay off their parents' debt. In the article it is stated that, for its projects in Afghanistan, NATO routinely uses bricks that are made by children. However, a NATO spokesperson, Lt. Bashon W. Mann, denies this and says that the force conducted frequent inspections at construction sites and that they had no knowledge of having used building materials made by children.

Is the Commission able to refute these allegations and prove that NATO does not use bricks produced by companies that use child labour?

If not, what kind of measures is the Commission planning to take to make sure that NATO, an international organisation of which 21 EU Member States are members, does not use products made by children for its projects?

Answer given by High representative/Vice-President Ashton on behalf of the Commission, 8 June 2011

According to the current Treaties the High Representative/Vice-President has no competence in the field of military operations and has, therefore, no say over Member States' policies with respect to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) activities in Afghanistan.

As to the EU, the issue of children affected by armed conflict has been retained as one of the priorities under the human rights country strategy established for Afghanistan. This decision is based on the revised implementation strategy on children and armed conflict adopted by the Council on 7 December 2010, which followed the EU review of the implementation strategy of the EU guidelines on children and armed conflict (in line with relevant United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions (1881 (2009), 1612 (2005)) and the United Nations (UN) list of country situations annexed to the UN Secretary General's report(1) on this issue).

Following the adoption of the Council conclusions on child labour in June 2010, the EU took a number of concrete initiatives to combat the worst forms of child labour, such as issuing a guide on 'Buying social: A guide to taking account of social considerations in public procurement.'

In November 2010, the Commission consulted all interested partners, including civil society, trade unions, business community, on corporate social responsibility in the eradication of the worst forms of child labour. Following the consultations, the Commission initiated work on a specific communication in this area.

Just a few weeks ago, the Commission selected projects worth of EUR 11 million (in the context of the Instrument 'Investing in people') to support a worldwide campaign against child labour.

Management of EU assistance to Afghanistan

Written Parliamentary Question by MEP Pino Arlacchi

EP (24.01.2011) - Considering the highly fragmented nature of international aid to Afghanistan, and in view of the urgent need to establish coordination mechanisms among international donor countries and to provide for detailed evaluations of EU and international aid in order to combat the lack of transparency and the limited mechanisms for donor accountability,

1. could the Commission set out the main differences as regards types of aid, broken down by origin (EU, the United States, etc.)?
2. could the Commission give its assessment of the different procedures for monitoring the use of EU funds in Afghanistan?

Answer given by Mr Piebalgs on behalf of the Commission, 1 March 2011

1. The US and other donors committed, at the July 2010 Kabul Conference, to seek greater alignment and harmonisation of assistance. Aid remains however fragmented, and donor coordination weak.

In addition, US official development assistance (ODA) comes from a wide range of budgetary sources managed by different agencies and departments, each operating with a significant degree of autonomy. The US contracts the implementation of a large part of its assistance to the private sector whereas other donors apply a mixed approach — some via Multi Donor Trust Funds, some through centrally or partially decentralised programmes, some through NGOs or through technical assistance.

Japan is currently the second largest donor, with a USD 5 billion programme (2009-14), focusing on security, reintegration, and development/reconstruction (mostly physical) and is expected to further increase in future.

The main EU Member State contributors in terms of ODA (United Kingdom (UK), Germany, Italy, France and the Netherlands) have provided approximately EUR 700 million p.a. in aid to Afghanistan over the last two years. The UK and Germany plan to increase their aid, which is concentrated in the regions in which they are militarily present, and is channelled through their Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

EU funding promotes stability and poverty reduction. The current Multi Annual Indicative Programme 2011-13 under the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) focuses on the three focal sectors of Rural Development, Governance and Rule of Law, and Health and Social Protection, with the addition of Regional Cooperation as non-focal sector. For this period, an amount of EUR 600 million is foreseen.

In addition to bilateral cooperation under the DCI, Afghanistan benefits from regional programmes for Asia, in particular the Aid for Uprooted People programme, as well as from support through DCI thematic programmes like the food security thematic programme (FSTP) and the programme on Non State Actors (NSA). Additional financing comes as well from the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), and the Instrument for Stability. These programmes are consistent with the bilateral cooperation. Afghanistan also benefits from the facility for rapid response to soaring food prices (Food Facility). Humanitarian assistance (governed by specific principles) is also provided by the EU.

2. For EU funds, the Commission has various procedures in place to minimise the risks of misuse of funds. As regards EU funding through international organisations, systems are in place for monitoring and checking the management of EU funds e.g. checking those organisations' compliance with international accounting, control, audit and procurement standards, reporting, verification for UN-administered Trust Funds (under the Financial and Administrative Framework Agreement between the Commission and the UN). The Commission provides regular information on these issues to the European Parliament: http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/who/partners/international-organisations/index_en.htm
The Commission also conducts financial and system audits of organisations or NGOs' capacity to manage funds through a grant agreement or other instruments.

Written Parliamentary Question by MEP Pino Arlacchi

EP (24.01.2011) - In the period 2002-10 the combined EU (European Community and Member States) budget for aid to Afghanistan totalled around EUR 8 billion, but a significant proportion of the EU aid was lost along the distribution chain. The main reasons for this are: waste, excessive use of intermediaries, security costs, overbilling and corruption.

The EU must ensure transparency and accountability in relation to the financial assistance provided to the Afghan Government, international organisations and local NGOs, in order to ensure the coherence of aid and the success of Afghanistan's reconstruction and development.

1. Could the Commission provide information, if possible with a breakdown region by region, sector by sector, and project by project, of the overall assistance provided by the EU since the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001?
2. Could the Commission submit data setting out, on the one hand, the overall EU assistance to Afghanistan since the conflict began until today and, on the other hand, the individual assistance from each EU Member State?
3. Could the Commission provide a breakdown of the distribution of European aid since 2001 between consultants on the one hand and stakeholders on the other?

Answer given by Mr Piebalgs on behalf of the Commission, 10 March 2011

The EU is one of the major donors providing official development assistance to Afghanistan. From 2002 to 2010, the Commission committed more than EUR 2 billion in assistance, including around EUR 345 million in humanitarian assistance. The average annual EU assistance (EU budget and Member States' bilateral contributions combined) to Afghanistan amounts to nearly EUR 1 billion (in commitments).

Since 2009, the Commission has produced an 'EU Blue Book', which provides an overview of EU civilian development assistance, from the EU budget or Member States, per sector: http://www.delafg.ec.europa.eu/en/downloadable_documents/EUBlueBookAfg_2009.pdf.

Afghanistan also benefits from EU funded regional programmes for Asia, in particular the Aid for Uprooted People programme, as well as thematic programmes such as the Food Security Thematic Programme and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights.

In Table 1 of the annex A sent directly to the Honourable Member and to Parliament's Secretariat, EU assistance to Afghanistan is presented sector by sector and project by project, covering the period between 2001-09 (updated figures covering up to 2010 will be available around March 2011). Information region by region is not available since most programmes are at the national level.

As regards the breakdown of the distribution of European aid between consultants and stakeholders, a sample was taken (August 2010) of 183 development aid-related contracts concluded with Afghan partners and stakeholders (local NGOs and private companies), international NGOs, international organisations and contractors. The sample covers nearly EUR 362 million, i.e. over 90 % of EU development funds contracted since 2008. The 4 categories of contracts indicate the following:

— All the 28 individual contracts with local (Afghan) partners (e.g. NGO, service/works/supply companies) for a total value of EUR 25 million benefit 100 % Afghan beneficiaries;

— In the 16 Agreements with international organisations (for a total value of EUR 225 million) the consultancy costs and the related administrative costs represent approximately 12 % of the agreements' value; this percentage is equally shared between the two types of costs (6 % Technical Assistance costs + 6 % administrative costs);

— In the 65 grants contracts with international NGOs (for a total value of EUR 96 million), on average, 12 % of the contracts' value is costs related to international consultancy and 5 % is administrative costs;

— There are 74 service, works and supply contracts with international contractors (for a total amount of EUR 51 million). We estimate that 90 % of the services contracts are for the benefit of international contractors (fees of international consultants and related administrative expenses) and only 10 % of the works and supply contracts are for the benefit of international contractors (works and supplies are by definition assets for the country), the percentage of Technical Assistance out of the total amount benefitting local beneficiaries is about 17 %. This is a normal percentage for a post-conflict situation, given the paucity of national capacity in management and technical expertise as well as the need for human resource development.

Management of EU security assistance to Afghanistan

Written Parliamentary Question by Pino Arlacchi

EP (24.01.2011) - Assuming that there cannot be stability or peace in Afghanistan without the State being fully responsible for the security of its citizens, and considering the difficulties of keeping track of all the policies relating to this area,

1. Could the Commission explain what percentage of the total aid from the EU represents any measures related to security?

2. Could the Commission submit a figure for security-related expenditure by EU-financed projects, compared with security-related expenditure by international organisations and other donor countries in Afghanistan?

Answer given by Mr Piebalgs on behalf of the Commission, 1 March 2011

Security costs may vary depending on the type of implementation partner and on the type of operation. It is important to distinguish between:

(a) Security expenditures related to the implementation of projects and programmes funded by the Commission;

(b) Security expenditures related to Trust Funds administered by international organisations.

(a) Security expenditures related to the implementation of projects and programmes funded by the Commission

With respect to projects managed centrally by the Commission (implemented with the support of Technical Cooperation service contracts) and NGO projects, the average proportion of security costs relative to total EU assistance is 1-2 %. However, there are differences due to the type of projects, project location, security needs and related response strategy). Proportions range from 0.04 % to 7.7 %, with some projects not incurring any specific security-related costs.

(b) Trust Funds administered by international organisations

In Afghanistan, the EU frequently contributes to Multi Donor Trust Funds, which are managed by international organisations. In this case, the international organisations are in charge of the costs related to security measures and the EU contributes to them indirectly. The World Bank in Kabul calculates that their identifiable security-related costs (such as, for instance, armed guards on compounds and residences, amortised armoured vehicles, routine security maintenance, etc.) account for approximately 7-9 % of their total administrative budget in Afghanistan, the administrative budget corresponds in turn to approximately 1.5 %-2.5 % of the total budget of the programme implemented in Afghanistan

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) confirms that UN security costs account for 10-12 % of their programmes' costs. In addition, all UN agencies contribute to the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), which is responsible for security analysis, overall security of UN staff, etc.

At its meeting on 28 September 2010, the Budgetary Control Committee examined aid to Afghanistan and the Commission responded to various questions.

Struggling to improve education

IRIN (29.08.10) - Education in Faryab Province, northern Afghanistan, has never been as good as it is now thanks to the dozens of new schools built by Norway.

Over 120 new schools have been built in the province over the past few years and 40-50 more will follow in the next two years, with Norwegian development assistance.

"Faryab's educational needs have been met by the new schools," said Gul Agha Ahmadi, a spokesman of the Ministry of Education.

For an estimated population of 800,000 there are 423 state schools, 20 religious seminaries, two teacher training institutes and one vocational training centre in the province, according to the Education Ministry.

Over 40 percent of the total 282,080 students in the province are female.

Faryab is a success story in a country where almost half of the 12,600 schools nationwide do not have a building (classes are held in the open or in tents), officials said.

"We want to concentrate our efforts in a few development sectors. What is important is that Norwegian taxpayers want to see some concrete results," Kåre R. Aas, the outgoing Norwegian ambassador to Afghanistan, told IRIN.

Norway's flag and other official symbols are not used on the schools which, according to some experts, have helped keep them immune from armed attacks. Schools, students and teachers have often been attacked and harassed by gunmen allegedly associated with Taliban insurgents.

At least 20 percent of Norway's US\$125 million annual aid budget for Afghanistan goes to Faryab Province, where about 500 Norwegian soldiers are stationed as part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force.

A school in Faryab built thanks to Norwegian aid money in 2008 (file photo)The rest of the aid is spent on projects elsewhere in the country, at the discretion of the Afghan government.

Aid and the military

NATO-member states have troops in different parts of the country, where they are also engaged in aid activities through the so-called Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs).

Aid agencies have criticized the involvement of PRTs in humanitarian and development projects, labelling the process "aid militarization".

"Our military has no involvement in our civilian development projects," said Aas, adding that his country's aid was strongly "scrutinized and monitored" in order to prevent mismanagement and corruption.

But he conceded that not all aid projects in which Norwegian money was involved, had been corruption-free: "We have closed down some projects after corruption charges against specific projects which we supported," Aas said.

Education Ministry officials said Norway's school building projects were planned in collaboration with the government and implemented by NGOs.

Helmand versus Faryab

Afghanistan's 2004 constitution insists on geographical equity in terms of development projects and the delivery of services, but the reality is different. In terms of education, the southern province of Helmand, severely affected by the insurgency, appears to lag far behind Faryab Province.

Though it has roughly the same population as Faryab, Helmand has only 282 schools of which over 150 have been closed due to insecurity and lack of teachers, provincial officials said.

But Pierre Fallavier, director of the Kabul-based independent think-tank Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, introduced a note of caution: "Building schools does not mean improving education - any more than building a hospital means improving health care," adding that the focus on education was good but not at the cost of other important issues.

The reasons children do not go to school include the lack of safe road access, the lack of clean school toilets, parents' financial situations as well as their attitudes towards education, said Fallavier.

Up to seven million students are currently enrolled at schools across Afghanistan, according to the Education Ministry, indicating significant progress since 2001 when only two million (boys only) were enrolled.

However, about five million school-age children, mostly girls in the insecure southern and eastern provinces, are still being deprived of an education due to war, poverty, lack of schools and social restrictions, the Education Ministry said.

Afghan women plan for future

ISAF Joint Command – Afghanistan (27.07.10) - Members of Provincial Reconstruction Team Panjshir met with Annisa Gul of the District Development Assembly for women's affairs in the Paryan District Saturday to discuss various projects and make a humanitarian assistance drop.

The women's affairs representatives from the DDA report women's affairs issues from their district area to the district governor and provincial development counsel in order to make improvements in their specific area.

"We are working on promoting women's education and getting supplies," said Gul, through an interpreter. "We are also working on getting electricity for the girls' school." Gul said she has big plans for the future and has worked hard since being elected to the position six months ago. She works with a women's shura that helps her read, write and create project ideas.

"We are working on getting a sewing project and maybe a carpet loom for Paryan," she said. "If we get a loom we could sell to the shops in Paryan for profit." Grants from the U.S. Embassy are available specifically for women's affairs projects, said U.S. Army Spc. Allison Cherkosly, a Panjshir PRT civil affairs member.

"They are underutilized because most people don't know about them," said Cherkosly. "That is where the PRT comes in. We will help her submit the projects."

After the discussions on future women's affairs projects, Gul accompanied the PRT to Kohe-sur Village to make a humanitarian assistance drop for a girls' school. Members of the Panjshir PRT civil affairs team dropped off more than 200 book bags, school supplies and a tent. In the village, school is conducted all year on a dirt mound with more than 200 students.

"We will use the tent to help protect the students from weather," said Hajj Shah Wali, a National Solidarity Program member and schoolteacher in the village.

These supplies encourage more girls to go to school and are important because they need things like pencils, to learn, said Wali. Within the next several weeks, a permanent tent will be brought to the village by the Panjshir PRT civil affairs team in addition to winter clothes for the upcoming cold-weather months.

"These people are really happy to receive help," said Haji Shahwali, Community Development Counsel leader for the Kohe-sur Village. "The PRT is the first to provide help for the village, and we are very thankful."

EU money to Afghan insurgency

Written Parliamentary Question by Pino Arlacchi

EP (26.07.2010) - In Afghanistan the US military decided to outsource most of its logistics to private contractors, who in turn have subcontracted the protection of military convoys to local Afghan security providers. This has had disastrous consequences: the decision to place the US military supply chain into private hands is fuelling extortion and corruption, as warlords, local mafia bosses, and ultimately Taliban commanders end up taking a significant share of the USD 2.2-3 billion spent on military logistics in Afghanistan. This amount surpasses the funding going to the Taliban from their 'taxation' of the narcotics industry (calculated by the UN at 15 % of their war budget).

Protection money and extortion at every level of the military supply chain are the most significant source of funding for the insurgency, as recognised by US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in her testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in December 2009.

Since US and NATO military logistics follow similar lines, European taxpayers could end up funding the Taliban through the very entities that are supposed to combat them. NATO and all coalition forces in Afghanistan should, therefore, return to a situation whereby they provide their own military supply chain.

Can High Representative Catherine Ashton shed light on this issue and inform us what the EU is doing to remedy the situation?

Answer given, 27 September 2010

The Council is not in a position to comment on the military supply chains of NATO and the US.

As far as EU assistance is concerned, EUR 610 million has been committed to Afghanistan for the period 2007-10 and a further EUR 600 million will be committed for the period 2011-13.

In order to safeguard the use of these funds, EU assistance is mainly channelled either through international organisations (e.g. World Bank, UN) or implemented and managed directly by the Commission itself through the EU Delegation in Kabul under the EC's contractual and financial rules. In the case of funding through international organisations, the Commission examines their financial procedures before making any payments and is able to check subsequently if the procedures have been correctly applied. For programmes under direct management, the Commission monitors its assistance through field visits, audits and evaluations. These monitoring, procurement and auditing conditions also apply when EU funds are channelled through other implementing partners, such as international NGOs.

At the recent Kabul Conference on 20 July, all donors underlined their commitment to channel up to 50 % of their funds through Afghan Government systems (or multi-donor trust funds) in the years ahead, provided the Government of Afghanistan improves its capacity to properly manage funds. A significant proportion of EU assistance is already channelled through multi-donor trust funds, which are managed for example by the World Bank. Utilising funds in this manner ensures both a coherence of approach with other donors and more effective pooling of resources. In addition, the EU is increasing its focus on public finance management in its technical cooperation with the Afghan

Government in order to improve financial management of the ministries. This will prepare the Afghan Government to receive direct budget support from donors in the future.

Taking into account the complex and difficult situation which the country presents, all possible precautions are in place to manage properly EU funds in Afghanistan. Indeed, this was the conclusion of the 'Report on budgetary control of EU funds in Afghanistan' submitted by MEP Rapporteur Véronique Mathieu, European Parliament Committee on Budgetary Control, in December 2008.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams look at way forward in Afghanistan

NATO News (16.03.10) - At the 2010 Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Conference held in Kabul on the 16 and 17 March, NATO's Senior Civilian Representative, Ambassador Mark Sedwill, stressed PRTs' role in promoting reconstruction, development and good governance throughout Afghanistan; a role that will be key to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) strategy over the next 18 months.

The conference brought together members from the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, key regional players, as well as representatives from PRTs and other international organizations engaged in Afghanistan.

Ambassador Mark Sedwill opened the conference by introducing the three 'Rs' needed for PRTs' to succeed in Afghanistan.

"The first, Regain...we need to regain the initiative against the insurgents; secondly, we need to Rebuild and reinforce Afghan government institutions, military and civil, so they may take responsibility for governing their country; and lastly, Resolving the political grievances that fuel the insurgency," said Sedwill "Those are the three 'Rs' that are key to the strategy over the next 18 months."

Commander of ISAF Joint Command Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez, who hosted the event, explained the importance of the two-day conference to participants.

"The challenges are many, but you can and will make a difference in the lives of the people of this country by your diligent efforts," said Rodriguez. "You all have many talents and I wish you success in our efforts to return this country to the courageous and industrious people of Afghanistan."

Afghans need security, good governance and development

Among the many in attendance were team leaders from each of the PRTs throughout Afghanistan. Attendees, both civilian and military, listened and discussed the needs of the Afghan people. Security, good governance and development were frequently mentioned, in addition to the Afghan government's commitment to take an ever-greater responsibility to achieve these goals.

Local representatives underscored the need to support their community. The representatives also confirmed their support and willingness to prevent disruptive actions by hostile elements.

The conference included several breakout sessions to discuss topics such as information sharing and the assessments process; local governance and PRT collaboration/coordination; the district development concept; the Afghan government budget process; as well as contracting and fair funding.

Helmand Provincial Governor Mohammad Gulab Mangal shared some success stories. "The people of Helmand appreciate PRT contributions to the villages through security, the distribution of alternative crops, installation of bridges, the digging of wells, and building schools and clinics," said Governor Mangal. "Successes are happening."

What's a PRT and how does it work?

PRTs typically include about 80 people. Roughly 60 are experts in engineering, agriculture and foreign affairs, and about 20 are civilian specialists who work shoulder-to-shoulder with the various Afghan partners.

Working together, the teams help extend the central government's authority throughout the country by providing area security and supporting the reconstruction and development activities of Afghan, international, national and non-governmental actors in the provinces.

Currently, there are 26 PRTs operating throughout Afghanistan. Some consist of military forces and civilian personnel from a single nation, others are multinational. They are all led by individual ISAF nations.

Overall, a wide variety of projects are underway, facilitated by the PRTs. Schools are being rebuilt with the mentoring or assistance of ISAF engineers, allowing children to resume their education. Irrigation ditches, pipelines, reservoirs and wells are being constructed, bringing water to the local population and farmers. Infrastructure is being repaired and/or built, facilitating mobility and communication. Greater access to medical assistance is being provided.

"Take this with you...you can teach the man to fish...don't just give the man a fish'," said U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan Representative Mark Ward. "The concept behind that is to help train, educate and create an environment within which governance can self sustain."

Building junk schools in Afghanistan

Written by Matthew Nasuti

Atlantic Free Press (25.12.2009) - U.S. Military falsifies completion of Farukh Shah School. Every building in the school complex has serious structural defects. NATO currently operates 26 Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan.

One of these PRTs is the Kapisa and Parwan Provincial Reconstruction Team. This particular PRT is led by American military personnel. The projects it manages in Kapisa Province are subject to periodic audits by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). This report focuses on one school which was being built by the PRT in Nijrab District. NATO refers to it as the "Farukh Shah School." A series of SIGAR inspections conducted in September and October of 2009, revealed that the PRT had "closed-out" the Farukh Shah School and apparently listed it as being completed. In fact, the school had been constructed so poorly that it was unfit for occupancy. While no American school children would ever have been permitted to use such a facility, the PRT officials apparently considered it adequate for Afghan children.

The Farukh Shah School project was begun in early 2007, and was supposed to have been completed in 2007. It was two years behind schedule. SIGAR's September/ October 2009, inspections discovered that every building in the school complex had serious

structural defects. This included the classrooms, latrine, guardhouse and generator building. In addition, the well on the site was defectively installed and needed to be redrilled. Finally, there is a missing retaining wall and the whole site was incorrectly graded, which will increase erosion. This may eventually undercut the foundation of the entire school, which is built on a hillside. The project is nothing short of an embarrassment.

SIGAR discovered that the Farukh Shah School project was closed-out in August 2009.

SIGAR vaguely reported that the reason was that the Pentagon's 2009 fiscal year was ending. The explanation does not make any sense. In addition, such a close out violates Pentagon regulations. U.S. Department of Defense Financial Management Regulation, Vol. 12, Chap. 27, Section 270204(F) states that projects are only closed-out "on completion." The implication here is that there was pressure to show progress in Kapisa in 2009, even if there was none, so the school was simply labeled as completed.

SIGAR has refused to name those responsible, but the Kabul Press will. Responsibility rests with the former and current PRT leaders, U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. John "Snake" Pechiney and U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. W. Mark Heiser, with their boss, Task Force Warrior Commander Colonel Scott A. Spellmon and with his boss, Combined Joint Task Force - 82 Commander Major General Curtis M. Scaparrotti.

This episode raises the troubling question of how many other Afghanistan reconstruction projects have been falsely labeled as completed or a success, when such is not the case? The Kapisa and Parwan Provincial Reconstruction Team, while poorly staffed to perform reconstruction, is well-staffed for publicity. It has two public relations specialists, U.S. Air Force Captain Darrick B. Lee and Senior Airman Jason Troup. Assisting them are civic affairs specialists Captain Jordan Berry and U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Joshua Franke, along with civil engineer/photographer, 1st Lieutenant Anthony Raffaele. Their collective job is to churn out positive stories (i.e., propaganda).

Captain Lee authored a September 14, 2009, press release on the initial SIGAR inspection.

It was a positive article laced with references to progress and partnership. There was no mention of a single problem that the SIGAR inspectors discovered. It is one thing to put a positive spin on facts, but it is another to generate a grossly misleading story. It is unlikely that the U.S. Congress intended that taxpayer funds, appropriated for use in publicizing actual military accomplishments, would be used for covering up military misconduct. The Kapisa and Parwan PRT needs more engineers and project managers, and fewer public affairs people writing phony press releases and taking slanted publicity photos.

Final Note: NATO refers to the project as the "Farukh Shah School." This does not seem to be correct. Farukh Shah's official title was Farrukh Shah Kabuli, King of Kabul and Ghazni.

He was killed by Mongol invaders in the Eleventh Century. His most important accomplishment was to be the Great, Great-Grandfather of Baba Fareed (1173-1266), who was the inspirational Sufi poet in the Punjab. Besides being the moving force behind what we now know as the Punjabi language, Baba Fareed is unique as he is revered by Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs for the simple, humble and holy life that he led.

One of his favorite sayings was: "There are not pearls in every sea, there is not gold in every mine." He understood that not everyone is willing to follow the path to God. Baba Fareed would likely have forgiven the PRT officials for their shabby construction and lack

of interest in the Nijrab school children. In keeping with his spirit, this author can only add that the school should have been built with more care.

Drug trafficking and terrorist financing in Afghanistan

Written Parliamentary Question by Lorenzo Fontana

EP (24.11.2009)

According to a statement by the Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing in the US Treasury Department, David Cohen, al-Qaeda's wealth is decreasing as a result of global sanctions. This, in turn, has weakened the terrorist group's global influence and reflects 'one good measure of the success of these coordinated [counter-terrorism] efforts'. Conversely, the financial strength of the Afghan Taliban is on the rise due to its profitable heroin trading and other criminal activities.

What action will the Council take in order to fight against drug trafficking in Afghanistan? Will the Council involve third countries, in particular transit countries, in a coordinated effort to tackle drug trafficking from Afghanistan?

Answer given by the Council, 26 January 2010

In its declaration adopted on 11 December 2009, the European Council underlined the need to maintain a comprehensive approach to the challenges in Afghanistan, building on a combination of political, civilian/development and military instruments. The European Council stated that, at the international conference to be held in London on 28 January 2010, it expects clear commitments from the Afghan government in the fields of counter-narcotics, reintegration and socio-economic development and building strong relations with its neighbours and the region.

Efforts in the area of counter-narcotics are an important part of the EU Action Plan for Afghanistan and Pakistan adopted by the Council on 27 October 2009. The EU will continue to pursue cooperation initiatives in combating organised crime, in particular counter-narcotics, strongly supporting UNODC activities in the region. It continues to offer technical assistance to the countries of the region and will provide support to Afghanistan and its neighbours in using the regional coordination mechanisms between customs and border management authorities to reinforce their action against criminal organisations.

The EU supports Afghanistan's efforts to reduce the illegal cultivation and production of narcotic substances through its law enforcement, public health and rural development programmes. The EU also supports the National Drug Control Strategy and will maintain its counter-narcotics dialogue with Afghanistan.

Written Parliamentary Question by Lorenzo Fontana

EP (25.11.2009) - According to a statement by the Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing in the US Treasury Department, David Cohen, al-Qaeda's wealth is decreasing as a result of global sanctions. This, in turn, has weakened the terrorist group's global influence and reflects 'one good measure of the success of these coordinated [counter-terrorism] efforts'. Conversely, the financial strength of the Afghan Taliban is on the rise due to its profitable heroin trading and other criminal activities.

What action will the Commission take in order to fight against drug trafficking in Afghanistan?

Will the Commission involve third countries, in particular transit countries, in a coordinated effort to tackle drug trafficking from Afghanistan?

Answer given by Ms Ashton on behalf of the Commission

The narcotics trade in Afghanistan has become a fundamental element in the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. The narcotics trade has become a major destabilising factor not only in Afghanistan but in the whole of the region, including Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia. Furthermore, it has resulted in widespread corruption and has essentially provided the Taliban financial funding for its insurgency.

It is clear that the Taliban not only profit by taxing the poppy farmers and providing security for smugglers, but also receive money from the major drug traffickers as a compensation for securing the passage of heroin shipments.

As part of its strategy in Afghanistan, the EU has recognised the central importance of countering the narcotics trade as a means of stabilisation and development. The links between the narcotics trade and the insurgency in Afghanistan is addressed at a number of levels at both a national and regional level.

Within Afghanistan, the EU's rural development and governance programmes aim to address poppy cultivation and the narcotics trade. Alternative livelihood programmes in the east and northeast of the country have addressed the opium dependency of local economies and there is increasing evidence that a sustained reduction in poppy cultivation has been achieved in provinces such as Nangrahar. The EU will continue to target its rural development programmes in these regions to ensure that opium does not become embedded again in the economy.

In parallel to this, the EU is also focusing on governance and rule of law and as a means of strengthening interdiction capacity of the Afghan authorities. The EU is the largest donor to the Law and Order Trust Fund (EUR 270 million since 2002) which supports the Afghan National Police, including the Counter-narcotics police. There is also an EU initiative to take forward a new justice reform programme, again to strengthen the Afghan capacity to execute proper rule of law to address the problem of corruption which is inextricably linked to the narcotics trade.

At a regional level, the EU is focused on border management and regional cooperation programmes to help tackle the problem of drug trafficking. Some EUR 50 million has so far been invested in border management, building up security as well as facilitating trade and the movement of people. Border crossing points with Pakistan and Central Asia have been constructed and Afghan border guards and customs officers trained. The EU is also funding United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) regional programmes which are targeting the flow of precursors into Afghanistan from Central Asia, Iran and Pakistan. During the recent Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan in Islamabad in May 2009, the EU pledged further support to the UNODC regional programmes as well as to strengthening regional drugs control networks. In the latter respect, the EU will reinforce the role of the Drug Control Coordination Unit (DCCU) which is based in the region. Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan will be the main countries targeted in this programme, but it will also include the Central Asian countries (Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) as well as Azerbaijan and Turkey.

In conclusion, the EU is aiming to tackle the narcotics trade in Afghanistan both in-country through various agricultural and governance programmes as well as on a regional level. The importance of tackling the narcotics trade across the whole chain of production, trafficking and demand is crucial and, therefore, a regional approach engaging all the neighbouring countries has to be pursued.

NATO's illegal provincial reconstruction teams

Using humanitarian aid as a weapon violates international law and puts aid workers at risk

By Matthew J. Nasuti, former U.S. Air Force Captain and U.S. State Department Official

Kabul Press (08.11.2009) - NATO operates 26 Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan, with a goal to add teams to every one of its 34 provinces. The PRTs primarily consist of military personnel, with a mix of civilian aid officials and technical experts. They serve a dual function of supporting military operations and aiding civilian reconstruction and are an integral part of NATO's counterinsurgency (COIN) war plan.

C. Stuart Calison, Ph.D, a Senior Development Economist with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), recently released the October 2, 2009 memo he wrote to the Director of USAID in which he complained that Ambassador Richard Holbrooke was interfering with USAID's COIN projects and objectives in Afghanistan's border region. The memo reflects a growing reality, which is that all American aid seems cloaked with military goals and objectives.

One of the many problems with such a transformation in policy is that it violates international law. Another is that militarizing aid places civilian aid personnel at risk as they are seen as simply a tool of the Pentagon.

The Fourth Geneva Convention, Part I, Article 5, essentially provides that if a military force such as the Taliban "is satisfied" that a civilian aid worker "is definitely suspected of" hostile activity, such aid worker could lose his or her protected status and would become a legitimate target. Thus, civilians who accompany or provide services and support to the armed forces could fall outside of the definition of "civilians" as set out in the Third Geneva Convention, Article 4.

Major General Michael Tucker of ISAF-Kabul was quoted by Kevin Baron in the September 15, 2009, edition of Stars and Stripes as stating that NATO uses humanitarian aid as a "key factor" in its "population-centric operations." This prompted Stephen Cornish, the director of bilateral programs for CARE Canada, to state that:

NATO had placed "a counterinsurgency umbrella" over humanitarian aid in Afghanistan, which now places aid workers at risk.

He went on to tell Stars and Stripes that aid organizations are being targeted if there is any suspicion of collaboration with the American forces. Stars and Stripes then interviewed a Taliban spokesman who stated:

"We only respect truly neutral and independent aid organizations that do not work at the behest of American and Western forces."

In April 2009, a group consisting of 11 humanitarian organizations, including Oxfam, CARE, Action Aid, Catholic Relief Services, Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee, released a report entitled: "Caught in the Conflict." It criticized the increasing militarization of aid and stressed that military forces have a legal obligation to clearly distinguish themselves from civilians. It reported a doubling of NGO personnel killed in 2008, compared to 2007. It stated that on average, three Afghans are summarily executed every four days due to their association with the government or foreign forces.

It also stated: "NGO projects have been forced to close due to visits from PRTs or foreign donor agencies in heavily armed escorts. In the aftermath of such visits, communities have informed NGOs that they can no longer guarantee the safety of project staff."

In its April 3, 2009, press release, Oxfam summarized the "Caught in the Conflict" report as follows:

"The report warns the military are blurring the distinction between aid workers and soldiers by doing extensive humanitarian and assistance work for counter-insurgency purposes and by using unmarked white vehicles, which are conventionally only used by the UN and aid agencies. This undermines local perceptions of the independence and impartiality of aid agencies and therefore increases the risk to aid workers. The agencies also warn that the increasing distortion of humanitarian and development assistance for military aims could undermine long-term stability."

Article 37 of the Geneva Convention's Additional Protocol I (Prohibition of Perfidy) prohibits the "feigning" of civilian (i.e., non-combatant) or UN status, which the use of the unmarked white vehicles by American and French forces might constitute. In addition, there are the repeated stories in northern Afghanistan of the military using unmarked civilian helicopters to ferry troops into combat. See the Institute for War and Peace Reporting's October 26, 2009 article "Helicopter Rumor Refuses to Die" by Ahmad Kawoosh in Mazar-e-Sharif.

One of the reasons for the mix of military and civilian personnel in the PRTs is that countries such as the United States have refused to provide a sufficient number of civilian specialists, thus pushing the military to take the lead. Spencer Ackerman of The Washington Times reported on May 4, 2009 that the U.S. State Department, after eight years of war in Afghanistan, still had yet to begin ramping up its corps of civilian reconstruction experts.

This author concurs with Mr. Ackerman. The State Department remains bureaucratically opposed to both the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and successive Secretaries of State have refused to remove Senior Executive Service (SES) officials from the Department who have been sabotaging the war effort. As a result, the military surges while the State Department continues to dither. Intentionally refusing to assist in the war effort borders on criminal conduct.

Mr. Ackerman also reported that, on April 21, 2009, the Afghan government put forward a proposal entitled: "The Civilian Surge Plan." It calls for 676 foreign specialists to assist Afghan Government ministries in aid distribution and reconstruction efforts. In response, the U.S. State Department only identified 51 experts it could send. To its credit the Afghan government's plan opposes the mixing of civilian and military personnel and recommends the phase out of the mixed PRTs.

To-date, the Obama Administration has apparently not implemented any portion of the Afghan Government's proposal. As a result, civilian aid workers in Afghanistan are increasingly subject to attack, with a corresponding decline in humanitarian aid and stability.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan – how they arrived and where they are going

NATO Review (Autumn 2007) - In the battle to win hearts and minds in Afghanistan, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are often on the front line. William Maley looks at how they have evolved and what's next for them.

As an innovative approach to building peace and security, the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan were very much a response to unanticipated circumstances. They were largely new in structure, although elements of the PRT model were earlier seen in conflicts such as Vietnam.

The Bonn Agreement of December 2001 provided for the deployment in Afghanistan of an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Given that Afghanistan lacked a credible national army or police force, ISAF was seen as essential to dealing with a looming security vacuum in rural areas.

Unfortunately, the politics of contributor countries undermined the Bonn strategy. This, and the logistical difficulties of deploying PRTs all over the large and distant Afghanistan, meant that ISAF was deployed just to Kabul. It was only after two years, and much lost momentum, that ISAF expansion beyond the capital was authorized by United Nations Resolution 1510 in October 2003.

It was during these two years, when ISAF expansion was blocked, that minds turned to other ways of establishing an international presence in the countryside: the PRTs became the device of choice. Ironically, their military components are now linked back to ISAF, which itself is under NATO command.

The task of replacing ISAF as a source of security was always a difficult one. But as time has gone by, one point has become increasingly clear – there is no single 'PRT experience'. Instead, a range of factors come into play which shape what PRTs can achieve, and in what ways.

First, PRTs vary according to location, and the specific security and development needs in a particular area. The experience of the New Zealand PRT in Bamian has been very different from that of the Canadians in Kandahar.

Bamian province is geographically encapsulated, relatively ethnically homogeneous, and well run by a local administration where Afghanistan's only female governor enjoys strong community support. This relatively low-threat environment means the PRT has successfully provided ambient security and has largely avoided being drawn into activities which are properly those of the Afghan authorities.

In Kandahar, by contrast, the population and the PRT are exposed to attacks by Taliban militants reportedly operating from safe havens in Pakistan. The local administration has had a very patchy record of achievement. And local politics is marked by intense rivalries between different forces aspiring to power.

As a result, the Kandahar deployment has proved far more difficult to manage than that in Bamian. This is reflected in the relative casualty rates. More than 40 Canadian soldiers have been killed. New Zealand's deployment has not seen a single death from hostile attack.

Second, PRTs vary according to the practices and military cultures of contributing states. The problem of 'national caveats' on the ways in which forces might be used has long been a serious concern for commanders in Afghanistan. These caveats reflect significant differences in the world-views of contributing states. They are manifested in both their militaries' organizational cultures, and in what they see as appropriate roles for their PRTs.

For example, some militaries are committed to using kinetic force to establish a credible, robust presence. For others, this might reflect both a failure of imagination and a reluctance to use negotiation as a way of achieving concrete objectives.

But even within a single state PRT, a change of leadership can significantly affect how a PRT operates. Individual PRT commanders bring different levels of knowledge of the Afghan environment and different understandings of what the task of the PRT should be. Some throw themselves with gusto into the experience – others wish to get out of the country as quickly as possible.

Third, PRTs vary according to how effectively they engage with local leaderships and populations. Successful PRTs need to bring positive change in their environments. Even if well-run, a PRT will have done little to foster continuous reconstruction if it does not lay the foundation for stable local development.

By now it is a common place observation that development of this kind requires serious engagement between outside actors and internal forces. Again, there is quite a degree of variety.

In rural Afghanistan, personal ties tend to shape people's behaviour more than links between formal organizations. This benefits PRTs which can leave personnel in place for longer periods, as they can cultivate these kinds of informal ties.

It also helps PRTs who have staff with relevant language skills. PRTs operating in the north, where Persian is more widely used, have an advantage over those in the south where Pashto is more common: Persian is relatively easy to learn, whereas Pushtu is exceptionally difficult.

There are further coordination complications arising from the nature of the PRTs' tasks. For example, PRT leaderships tend to be much closer to provincial administrations than to the central authorities. This can create problems when provincial administrations are not fully attuned to the central government's priorities – particularly as strategic reconstruction priorities are formally set through consultation between donors and the Afghan government.

PRTs can also be more interested in their home government's priorities than those of the Afghan government. It is tempting for PRTs to meet local (and donor) needs through 'Quick Impact Projects', and these can on occasion be beneficial, especially if they have been carefully devised with locals. But unfortunately, some of these projects can also prove to be costly, unsustainable white elephants, and reflect a lack of understanding of the complexities of Afghanistan's diverse micro-societies.

'Development' is not simply a set of projects; it involves capacity-building, sustainability strategies, and above all an understanding of how societies operate. The most successful PRTs have been those that are best attuned to recognizing Afghans' conceptions of Afghans' needs. A good PRT leadership strategy is to spend as much time as possible listening, rather than talking.

This has led to tensions on the ground between some PRTs and experienced NGOs (Non-governmental organizations), which tend to approach reconstruction from a much more rigorously 'developmental' perspective. Many NGOs fear a blurring in locals' eyes between 'humanitarian assistance' and 'development', on the one hand, and the prosecution of a global 'war on terror' on the other. This is especially so when reconstruction is presented as a way of counter-acting political forces such as the Taliban and al Qaida.

But perhaps just as serious is the difficulty that Afghans may have in distinguishing between PRTs, on the one hand, and other international military forces on the other. With some uniformed personnel engaged in reconstruction, and others making forceful use of military power, confusion among Afghans is hardly surprising. With civilian casualties mounting, it will likely become more difficult to protect PRTs from a backlash.

Within PRTs, too, there can be tensions between military and civilian components. These can have either positive and creative or negative and destructive consequences, depending on how they are handled.

There is one final issue which is as yet not much discussed: what processes should be put in place to manage a transition to local ownership of PRT activity? The Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police will eventually have to take over some security responsibilities which PRTs currently are handling, but as yet there is no clear timetable or template to govern such a transition.

Afghanistan cannot confidently assume that the current pattern of PRT deployment will be sustained for more than the short-to-medium term. Ultimately, it will be domestic politics in contributing countries, rather than the needs of Afghanistan, that will shape the transition.

And if casualties climb, international commitment to running PRTs may decline. For this reason, Kabul would be wise to begin thinking now about how to handle such a situation – no matter how distant it may be.

Improving schools in Northern Afghanistan

ISAF/NATO News - Soldiers of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Brigade Special Troops Battalion, from the 10th Mountain Division's 1st Brigade Combat Team have been coordinating efforts recently to help improve school facilities in Dehdadi District in northern Afghanistan.

Three schools they have been working with are the Habiday Balkh Preschool, Primary school and High School.

"In this district 60 percent of the people are educated," said Capt. Timothy Williams, HHC, 1st BSTB commander. "That's better than most districts in Afghanistan."

Abdullah, the principal of Habiday Balkh Primary School, said he appreciates the U.S. Army helping with the school's needs in this district and for providing the classroom tents for his school.

"We're putting in a new classroom for the preschool," said Williams.

The preschool has a building, but the wood roof is rotting and leaks when it rains. Contractors working on the building added a porch for the students, replaced rotten wood and sealed cracks in the walls.

"They are doing a good job," Williams said. "It looks a lot better than it did."

"We're trying to get the project approved to get the classroom done before the beginning of the next school year," he added.

Water purification is also an issue that the company is working to improve over the next year.

"I'll look into getting a well or water into the other side of this school too – for the garden," Williams said.

Williams noticed the students talking to his Soldiers more and more in English lately and asked the high school principal how the students had learned English so quickly.

"The students are starting to trust you more, so that's why they will talk English to you more now," said Sheienjen, Habiday Balkh High School's principal.

Building trust and helping the community are some of the key ingredients to accomplishing the mission in Afghanistan.
