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Afghan school emerges from hiding

Teachers breathe sigh of relief after defying Taliban for years



Marco Di Lauro / AP

After years of secret defiance of the Taliban's ban on education for girls, Afghan teachers say they are getting used to giving classes in the open.

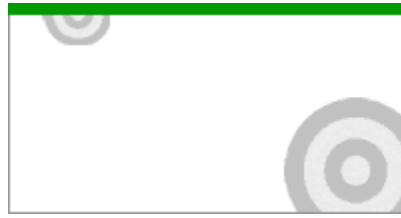
By Babak Behnam
 NBC NEWS PRODUCER

JELGA, Afghanistan, Jan. 1 — For six years, a school in Jelga, a rural village 40 miles south of the Afghan capital, defied the Taliban's ban on education for girls. The Taliban were frequent visitors, seeking to shut down the school, which stayed open despite threats from the religious police. With the Taliban gone, Jelga's teachers are learning how to teach in the open.

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Babak Behnam
NBC PRODUCER

UPSTAIRS ON A second floor spread among three rooms, some 60 students sit on a carpeted floor. Notebook in one hand, and pencil in the other, fresh faces look up in curiosity at foreign visitors.

Zubaida, the head instructor, supervises the school and trains its three teachers. Standing outside in the courtyard of the house recently, she recalled how Jelga's tribal elders decided to take advantage of an educational opportunity provided by the U.S.-based NGO CARE — despite the Taliban's ban on education for girls.

STANDING UP FOR EDUCATION

She recounted how the village secretly came together and housed the school in the top floor of a house belonging to the village doctor. When the Taliban authorities came to object and close the doors of the school, the tribal elders stood up and told the Taliban that they could not tell the villagers what do to with their children.

The Taliban returned, and each time they were rebuffed by the tribal elders. In fear of losing local support, the Taliban did not resort to their common practices of storming, arresting, and beating violators of the regime's extreme interpretation of Islam. But that did not make life any easier for Zubaida.

"We were very afraid," she said. "We would continue, because we had to fight for our rights. We had to fight against [the Taliban]."

Back in the classroom, Diba, one of the teachers, led her students in a Dari language lesson. A young girl stood up and covered her head with her scarf. She walked up to the front of the class, giggling all the way.

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The classroom was filled with girls — and a few boys. In the next room, sunlight streamed through the window. Fifteen girls recited a fable.

GETTING A HEAD START

The girls of Jelga have a head start in a country where the literacy rate for adult women in rural areas is 7 percent. CARE set up the program to help communities provide quality education for their children. In seven provinces, CARE's relief workers support the establishment of the schools and provide educational supplies. Village education committees hire the teachers, pay their salaries, and manage the schools.

"Basic education satisfies the desire of the Afghan people to educate their children," said Alina Labrada, CARE's spokesperson in Afghanistan.

CARE plans to get the Ministry of Education, now administered by Afghanistan's interim government, involved in bringing the rest of the country in line with its education program.

"Afghans were well known for their doctors, engineers, and teachers before the Taliban took over. You need to start from the bottom and rebuild the education system from scratch," Labrada said.

TEACHING IN THE OPEN

With additional funding, Labrada is hopeful of the program's continued success. These first few steps since the demise of the Taliban government have had considerable impact on the students and teachers of the school.

"When we were teaching, we would only focus on the door, because we were afraid the Taliban would come and take us away. Now I am happy that I can teach my kids and they can concentrate on their education," said teacher Diba.

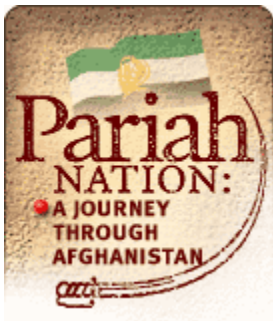
A group of young women sat in a semi circle on the porch by the courtyard and were asked what they wanted to be when they grew up. Farida, a 10-year-old, covered her face with her hands in embarrassment and said, "An engineer."

Twelve-year-old Arerzu spoke with conviction: "A doctor, so that I can help my people." Khatera, hiding behind her friend, pulled her scarf over her hair and smiled coyly. "I want to be a headmistress like Zubaida and teach girls."

In a country where women's rights have yet to be addressed, 12-year-old Marjan may give voice to many Afghan women's wishes: "For the people of Afghanistan, for my nation, I want to be president."



- NBC, MSNBC and Newsweek correspondents in the war zone.



NBC producer Babak Behnam is on assignment in Afghanistan.

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