

Uncertainty, violence darken Afghans' hope

By Paul Wiseman, USA TODAY

DOAB, Afghanistan — For the first time, the girls in this village were starting to learn — reading, writing, geography, history, math, science. They were starting to dream, too: Star student Roya Noori, 15, illiterate two years ago, wanted to become an architect. Harzoo Mohammedy, 14, planned to go to medical school. And Zuhul Noori, 12, saw herself at the controls of a commercial jet.

Then the learning stopped.

The new schoolhouse came under rocket fire last spring from the surrounding hills. Mysterious letters turned up at night, threatening to kill any girls who stayed in school and their principal.

The Afghan National Police, who were a five-minute drive away, did little, says Issa Noori, principal of the girls' school. Outgunned, they patrolled during the day and stayed safely inside their compound at night. Insurgents ruled the dark. The girls' school here in Wardak province closed in May and won't reopen until the government can guarantee the students' safety.

"This area is outside of government control," Noori says. "No one can protect us."

U.S.-led military forces launched Operation Enduring Freedom on Oct. 7, 2001, toppling the Taliban. Five years later, the situation is sobering. Rising insecurity threatens early accomplishments. From Kandahar in the south to Mazar-e-Sharif in the north, there is a growing sense that the democratically elected, U.S.-supported government of President Hamid Karzai and international forces can't shield ordinary citizens from insurgents and criminals.

"No one thinks the Taliban are going to roll into town next week and take over," says Paul Fishstein, director of the Kabul think tank Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. "But there is a lot of anxiety about what the future will bring."

An insurgency, raging in the south and in eastern provinces along the Pakistan border, has begun to creep into provinces that had been considered secure: Wardak, Kunduz, Ghazni, Balk. In the past two weeks, suicide bombers have struck Herat, a center of Persian culture in western Afghanistan, and Kabul, seat of the Afghan government and headquarters of the NATO force deployed to Afghanistan to establish security.

A thriving opium industry has spread corruption and lawlessness across the country and provided cash to the Taliban.

The insurgents are often called — or call themselves — Taliban, which would make them some of the same Muslim fighters who set up a harsh Islamic state and ruled from 1996 until 2001. But "it's more complicated than just the government vs. the Taliban," Fishstein says. "You've got a toxic brew of factors and interests. You've got Talibs. You've got drug dealers. You've got smugglers and criminals. You have a people with a stake in chaos and in maintaining a weak state."

U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, says some of the fighting involves Afghan tribes, warring over local issues such as water rights. If one tribe calls itself pro-government, he says, its rival might declare itself pro-Taliban.

Rebuilding is difficult

Rebuilding Afghanistan was bound to be difficult. The country has been shattered by three decades of war. According to the CIA's 2006 estimates, the typical Afghan will be dead by age 44; more than 60% of Afghans can't read; nearly one in six Afghan babies die in infancy. Afghan laborers are lucky to find work for \$2 or \$3 a day, the World Bank says.

"If we were under the impression that all of a sudden, after 25 years of war, everything would be wonderful — no, we were fooling ourselves," says Hassina Sherjan, founder of Aid Afghanistan, which ran the Doab girls' school.

No mistake, there has been progress. Afghans elected a president two years ago and a parliament last year — a breakthrough in a country ruled for three decades by a succession of communist apparatchiks, plundering warlords and medieval Taliban mullahs.

The U.S. government has spent \$3.7 billion on aid to Afghanistan, helping build or repair more than 1,000 schools, enroll more than 5.3 million students in school, vaccinate 4 million Afghans against polio and pave more than 600 miles of road. Fueled by foreign aid, the economy is booming. The Asian Development Bank predicts the Afghan economy to grow 12% this year after expanding 14% in 2005.

So why is the Taliban gaining strength and jeopardizing the gains of the past five years? The short answer: The U.S.-backed Karzai government's inability to establish its authority and credibility with ordinary Afghans "opened the door for the Taliban," Eikenberry says.

The lost time allowed the Taliban to regroup in neighboring Pakistan and prepare a comeback. The Karzai government is widely seen as corrupt, beholden to unpopular local warlords and out of touch with average Afghans.

"In many cases, it's not that the people support the Taliban; it's that they're alienated from the government," Fishstein says. "There's a perception that justice goes to the highest bidder." The Taliban, by contrast, is known for imposing impartial but Draconian justice in the areas they control.

Critics say the Karzai government hasn't rooted out entrenched warlords and officials enriching themselves in the drug trade.

"The government has the obligation to use the judicial system, infant as it is, to impose the rule of law and re-establish confidence in the central government," Antonio Maria Costa, executive director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, told the U.S. House Committee on International Relations in September. "The 100 beds at the new maximum-security prison at Pul-

i-Charki (near Kabul) should be filled up as soon as possible with major traffickers and corrupt officials."

'Have to be corrupt to survive'

At a checkpoint outside the eastern city of Jalalabad, police officers stop traffic and strut around with sticks and batons, banging on the hoods of cars and shouting at bewildered and frightened drivers. Occasionally, they let a vehicle continue on the road to Kabul.

No explanation is offered for why some get through and others don't. The unlucky travelers suspect that money is changing hands. "These are crazy people, corruption people," says Hafizullah Turab, 44, a Jalalabad writer and movie director who is stuck in traffic.

Police corruption is no mystery. Even police colonels earn only \$85 a month (though pay raises are coming). "They have to be corrupt to survive," says police Gen. Ahmad Sani, chief of police in northern Afghanistan's Kunduz province. And police are often deployed far from their homes. By contrast, the Taliban pays recruits \$12 a day and lets them fight where they live, says Samuel Chan, a researcher with the Center for Conflict and Peace Studies, a Kabul think tank.

The cops are outgunned, too. Criminal gangs and insurgents "are using rocket launchers and machine guns," says Wardak Gov. Abdul Jabbar Naeemi. "The police are using only Kalashnikovs, AK-47s. We don't have enough bullets."

Kunduz police chief Sani complains that his men drive around in dilapidated pickups. "Sometimes we have to tow them back because they are not working," he says. "The narco-traffickers are driving the latest Land Cruisers. We cannot keep up with them."

Some fault a half-hearted nation-building effort by the United States and the international community. According to the RAND Corp. think tank, international aid to Afghanistan amounts to \$57 per person vs. \$209 in Iraq. Troop levels also are low by international standards.

RAND reports that Afghanistan has just one Afghan or foreign soldier for every 1,000 people, compared with seven in Iraq, 19 in Bosnia and 20 in Kosovo.

RAND analyst Seth Jones estimated in the spring that Afghanistan needed another 80,000 troops (for a total of 200,000) to establish order. Last month, NATO failed to scrounge up 2,500 reinforcements it wanted to send to Afghanistan, though Poland came through with 1,000 troops.

The Afghan government and its international backers also have been losing the propaganda war to the Taliban.

"The Taliban make outrageous claims," says British Army Lt. Gen. David Richards, NATO commander in Afghanistan. "We need to be more dynamic in rebutting them. We have to make sure we're telling the truth, which takes longer."

Instead of talking about Western concepts such as democracy and the rule of law, the Taliban offers local villagers practical help — protecting farmers who grow opium poppies from the government's poppy-eradication program, for instance. "Just because people were glad to see the backs of the Taliban doesn't mean they want everything the West has to offer," Fishstein says.

In a paper written in May, Amrullah Saleh, head of Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security, describes a meeting between U.S. forces and villagers in Ghazni province. The U.S. delegation included a woman dressed in military fatigues — offensive to villagers who believe women should rarely venture outside the home and then only when covered head-to-toe in a burqa. Saleh suggested limiting contact between international forces and Afghan villagers to prevent inevitable cultural clashes.

Once a success story

An hour's drive west of Kabul, Wardak province should be a success story — and for a while, it was. Since the Taliban was overthrown, the province has undergone a dramatic makeover. Newly paved roads connect Wardak and its farmers to the markets in Kabul. New refrigeration plants keep their apples and potatoes from spoiling. A 50-bed provincial hospital has replaced one half its size. Girls in Doab and other Wardak villages were finally attending school.

The progress in Wardak is being chipped away by a strengthening insurgency and emboldened criminal gangs. Last month, gunmen kidnapped a Colombian aid worker and two Afghan employees of a French relief group in Wardak's Jalrez district. Human Rights Watch has reported attacks and threats on Wardak girls' schools, including the one in Doab.

"Their weapon is destruction and terror. Our weapon is education and development," says Sherjan of Aid Afghanistan. "If they attack one school, we should build three more."

Wardak is still safer than lawless Kandahar and Helmand in the south. Wardak's Gov. Naeemi says his province is secure. He dismisses the shadowy figures behind recent trouble as bandits. "They are calling themselves Taliban," he says. "They are robbers."

Regardless, the threatening "night letters" and rockets have had an effect. "Last year, this was the best province," principal Noori says. "Now, I can't defend myself from the insurgents. No one can in Afghanistan."

Noori, 45, wears tinted glasses and a scraggly salt-and-pepper beard. He tucks his unkempt hair under a black prayer cap. He tells his story in his home overlooking Doab, an ethnic Pashtun village of mud compounds and apple orchards. Inside, Noori serves a generous breakfast of fried eggs, fresh butter, flat bread and cups of green tea sweetened with heaping spoonfuls of sugar. A cow bellows outside. The smell of dung hangs over the village.

Noori, who was born and raised in Doab, became sympathetic to women's rights while he was in sixth grade. When his father taught him and his four sisters to read, the girls caught on faster.

"My sisters were smarter than me. But they just stayed at home, taking care of the animals and the house. I went to school (at Kabul University)," he says.

In the late '70s, he was imprisoned as an Islamic fundamentalist by Afghanistan's communist government. Released, he fled to Pakistan and worked with a Swedish aid group schooling Afghan refugees. He was hired as principal when Hassina Sherjan's Aid Afghanistan set up a girls' school in Doab two years ago. "Hassina's school was wonderful," he says. "She provided pens, paper, even clothing."

The school was popular with local people and soon had 300 students, including 100 who attended classes in three neighboring villages.

Things started to go wrong about 10 or 11 months ago, Noori says. Insurgents emerged in the Wardak countryside, issuing warnings against girls attending school. They attacked Turkish engineers paving the road that runs past Doab on the way to Logar province. Two of the engineers fled into the village, and Noori offered them refuge for several hours until the insurgents were gone.

Noori met with local clerics, convinced that some of them were working secretly with the insurgents. He explained that the school taught nothing offensive to Islam. "They couldn't argue with me. I'm a good Muslim," he says. The threat grew, however, and the school finally closed when the insurgents vowed to kill the students.

Noori believes that some of his neighbors were behind the intimidation. "The insurgents recruited some of the villagers," he says. "In Afghanistan, if you pay people, they'll do anything."

Human Rights Watch doubts that the Wardak insurgents belong to the Taliban. In a July report, the group notes that Wardak is a stronghold of the fundamentalist warlord Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, now a member of Afghanistan's parliament.

Like many Afghans, Noori believes that Pakistan is supporting the insurgency in an effort to keep Afghanistan weak and malleable — an allegation the Pakistani government has repeatedly denied. "We have a very bad neighbor," he says. "The first step toward progress is schools. If you can destroy a country's schools, they can't do anything."

Harzoo Mohammedy, the student who dreams of becoming a doctor, says she and her fellow students were willing to brave the threats they faced. "We were scared, but all the girls wanted to keep going to school. We didn't care," she says.

Noori hopes the Doab school will reopen in a few months: "We'll wait until the government gets a little stronger, and we can defend ourselves." He shrugs off the threat to his own safety. "Sometimes we need to struggle for the right things," he says. "It is God's decision when we die."