

Perpetuating Afghanistan's Cycle of Violence

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One of the most frequently used yardsticks to measure success in Afghanistan is the number of schools that have been built since the international intervention in 2001.

Everyone has heard the tales of how Taliban zealots prevented Afghan girls from obtaining an education, and thereby condemned females to a second-class existence. In the initial period following the U.S. invasion and collapse of the Taliban, a lot of media reports also focused their attention on the infamous burkha Afghan women were forced to wear.

These all-encompassing, head-to-toe articles of clothing came to symbolize the extent of the Taliban clerics' sadistic policies, and a casual observer could have easily been left with the false impression that America went into Afghanistan to free women from the enslaving confines of their burkhas.

Lost in that theory was the fact that the burkha has been common attire in that part of the world for more than three centuries, and the Taliban movement did not materialize until 1992. It also turned out to be a very fleeting and hollow "liberation" as the vast majority of Afghan women continue to wear the burkha—albeit by personal choice, and not by Taliban-enforced dictate.

This, of course, brings us back to the fact that Afghan girls have been re-admitted into schools as a result of this intervention by international troops. As evidenced by the acid-throwing attack against female students in Kandahar last year, this concept still has some very violent detractors. That said, I will admit that I am a strong supporter of any effort to increase the level of education and literacy in Afghanistan as the primary building block of that war-ravaged country's eventual construction.

Unfortunately, and despite the frequent lip-service paid to its importance, the development of an education system has taken a back seat to the necessity of waging a counter-insurgency.

Last June, when Australian war correspondent Sasha Uzunov and I travelled unembedded in Kandahar, one of our excursions was a tour of a downtown high school. The facility itself was crumbling and in desperate need of repair. But the principal explained that he had 4,000 students enrolled—nearly half of those being females. The pitiful library contained a meagre 400 books and one old computer. While this shortage of educational material made teaching a challenge, an even bigger obstacle was the fact that this school no longer had any teachers. All of the young male instructors had quit their \$60-a-month teaching jobs to enlist in the Afghan army—where soldiers now receive close to \$150 as a monthly salary.

With the military component taking the lead role in the international intervention and their

primary task being to produce a self-sufficient Afghan army as quickly as possible, it is easy to understand that young, literate and educated teachers would be seen as outstanding recruits. However, by draining this rare resource from the school system, we have ensured that the next generation of Afghans is being denied an education. They in turn will have limited employment options—other than soldiering (for either side) and the cycle of violence will be perpetuated.

In hindsight, it is easy to argue that teachers should have been declared essential workers and excluded from joining the Afghan army. However, it was obviously not an expected circumstance wherein a private soldier would earn nearly three times the salary of a high school teacher.

To move forward in Afghanistan, we need to become serious about addressing the actual education shortfall, rather than focusing on the construction of schoolhouses. In a climate where it rains only a few days a year, Afghan children could be taught lessons in the shade of a tree—provided they actually have a teacher and proper educational material to work with.

The Canadian military commitment is due to end in December 2011, but in the meantime, perhaps Canada should look at taking a lead role in prioritizing education in Afghanistan. With proper incentives, qualified teachers could be found throughout the global Afghan expatriate community and a national education curriculum could be properly defined.

Battling illiteracy and the resultant poverty will do more to eliminate the Taliban than the crushing weight of NATO's military might.

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