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## As Afghan war escalates, schools forced to close

By :LYNNE O'DONNELL and Karim Sharifi  
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One of Afghanistan's proudest achievements has been getting millions of children, especially girls, back into school since the toppling of the Taliban. But that success is crumbling across the south and in other battleground areas of the country, where hundreds of schools have been forced to shut down.

Sometimes the cause is fighting, sometimes it's intimidation from the Taliban.

Sometimes it's both, as in the case of the Loy Manda high school in southern Helmand province, part of the Taliban heartland. When the Taliban waged an offensive last winter, the school in the Nad Ali district was caught in the fighting between the militants and Afghan government forces.

"We had six rooms, books, chairs, but now everything is destroyed," said Hekmatallah, the headmaster, who like some Afghans goes by one name.

He's working toward reopening, but he had to get permission from the Taliban or else face their retaliation. They said they would allow it, if only boys attend — no girls — and if they are only taught a curriculum meeting the Taliban's hard-line version of Islam. Taliban mines from the time of the fighting still surround the school, and government forces are stationed just 40 yards (meters) from the school — a potential target for extremist attack.

Between the damage and the danger, none of the school's 650 students can attend.

That's the fate for an increasing number of children in the battlezone regions of Afghanistan. In 2015, 615 schools in the country's 11 most volatile provinces had to close because of violence, according to the Education Ministry. That was on top of the around 600 schools that remained shut down from the year before in those areas.

Almost half the 2015's school closures were in the final months of the year as the Taliban did not take their customary winter break. Violence escalated across the warmer southern provinces, which were the hardest hit by closures, ministry's spokesman Mujib Mehrdad said. Last year, 105 of Helmand's 545 schools shut down, and in neighboring Kandahar, the figure was 150 of 545 schools. The heaviest closures were in nearby Zabul, where more than half the province's schools — 140 out of 242 schools — shut their doors.

The United Nations counted 25 students, teachers and other school staff killed in Taliban attacks or crossfire in 2015. In eastern Nangarhar province, the Islamic State group seized control of several districts near the border with Pakistan and terrorized women and girls, banning them from school and work, and in some cases forcing them into marriage, according to residents who fled the area.

But extremists' ideological hatred of the schools and girls' education is not the only cause of school shutdowns. Human Rights Watch, the New York-based monitoring group, says the Afghan military continues to deploy weaponry in or around schools in battleground areas and uses them as fixed firing positions, even after President Ashraf Ghani banned the use of schools as military bases last year.

That puts children at "grave risk of attack by insurgents who then see schools as military targets," HRW's Afghanistan researcher Ahmad Shuja said.

During their time ruling Afghanistan in the 1990s until their overthrow in the 2011 U.S.-led invasion, the Taliban banned girls from school and mandated that boys learn the Quran by rote. Once they fell from power, schools and universities welcomed women back as teachers and students. With funding from the international community the number of children in school grew from 900,000 in 2001 to 8.3 million in 2011, according to figures from the U.N. assistance mission to Afghanistan. UNAMA says girls account for 39 percent of the total — up from near zero under the Taliban.

But in districts where the Taliban have regained control or have enough power to intimidate residents, they have returned to barring girls from the classroom and dictating curriculum for the boys.

In Helmand, where the Taliban control smuggling routes for drugs and other contraband, heavy fighting in recent months has put a number of schools like Loy Manda on the front line of the war, said the head of the provincial education department, Abdul Matin Jafar. In Gereshk district, he said, the education department building was attacked by insurgents, "was completely destroyed and now we have no office there to operate from."

Mohammad Mosa took his children out of their school in Nad Ali soon after the fighting started, and sent them to the provincial capital Lashkar Gah, not just for their safety but to ensure a well-rounded education. The Taliban had told parents in the district that they could re-open the school

on condition they hire one of the militants to ensure that only Islamic subjects were taught, he said.

“Our kids were terrified of going to school as both sides are firing rockets, destroying our neighborhood,” Mosa said.

Even temporary school closures result in lower attendances, particularly by girls, once classes resume. In the northern city of Kunduz, which was besieged by the Taliban in October, at least three schools were commandeered by the armed forces for use as bases. False reports were carried by the local Tolo television station that Taliban had entered a Kunduz University women’s dormitory and raped residents during their assault on the city in September. As a result, fewer women returned to their studies once the city was cleared of insurgents, the school’s dean Abdul Qudus Zarifi said.

The HRW report said that girls “often bear the brunt of these disruptions because parents are wary of sending daughters to schools occupied by armed men.”