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Graft rules in Afghan orphanages

By Mina Habib

5/9/2014

Nurullah, 16, kicked away stones angrily as he walked across the yard of the Tahia-e Maskan orphanage, making his way through groups of children who sat warming themselves in patches of sun.

Dressed in dirty clothing, he was reluctant to speak, and seemed scared of being overheard by staff members.

"Conditions are not at all good in the orphanage," he said eventually. "You can't do anything about it, either. Do you know how much we suffer from the cold? We stay under blankets in cold rooms for hours, day and night."

As he walked off, he said, "That isn't the only problem. There are many problems here, but one cannot talk about them."

Although conditions are hard for the 450 children who live at the Kabul orphanage, places there are nonetheless prized, due in part to the fully-funded scholarships to study abroad which are available to some when they are old enough.

Children and staff said that many of the residents came from the northeastern provinces of Panjshir and Badakhshan, and had been enrolled at the orphanage through family connections.

One child from Badakhshan living at the orphanage, who asked to remain anonymous, said that not only were both his parents still alive, his family was far from poor.

"There are more chances to obtain foreign scholarships at these orphanages," he explained. "So my father, who has a friend who's a member of parliament, asked him to enroll me in this orphanage so as to be able to take advantage of the scholarships."

A long-term staff member, who also asked to remain anonymous, said that most of the children were from Panjshir and Badakhshan, and were placed there to boost their chances of studying abroad.

"Members of parliament from Panjshir and Badakhshan have deprived Kabul children of their rights. Don't they have better things to do? There's nowhere that lawmakers don't interfere," he said.

Sayed Abdullah Hashimi, director of orphanages at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, said that the coveted scholarships were provided by the Afghan government or sponsored by host countries. He said 67 school-leavers from a number of orphanages in Afghanistan had won bursaries to study in India, Pakistan and Turkey over the last three years.

"The ministry of higher education has assigned 5% of its scholarships to the orphanages, and those who are awarded them are wholly funded by the government," he explained. "The host country covers all the costs of the [other kind of] scholarship."

Hashimi added that his department was very concerned that officials were abusing their powers to get children into Tahia-e Maskan, adding that his office was developing a better-documented admissions policy.

"Among the current children, under than 10% are from Panjshir and more than 60% from Badakhshan," he said, adding that genuinely vulnerable children were missing out because legislators and even some government ministers were giving priority to relatives.



Of the 10 children to whom IWPR spoke at the orphanage, seven said that they were from Panjshir or Badakhshan.

Wasel Mohammad Nur, deputy minister of labor and social affairs, rejected claims that children from northeastern provinces were being prioritized over local youngsters.

"Since there were no orphanages in Panjshir and Badakhshan in the past, more children were taken in from these two provinces," he said.

Although places at the Kabul orphanage are much sought after, the children say conditions are poor.

Rooms in the orphanage smell damp, with dirty bedding and few sources of light throughout the building. Some of the children show signs of neglect, and all look downcast.

"As well as the food being inadequate - we're starving most of the time - it isn't healthy, either," said Hakimullah, 14. "We don't get treated properly when we get sick. They only give us a paracetamol tablet at the clinic and that's all. They don't take us to hospital unless we're too ill to walk."

The director of the Tahia-e Maskan orphanage, Atiullah Wahaj, acknowledged that there had been a lack of heating during the winter months, but said it was because of city-wide power shortages.

"This problem existed all around Kabul. We too were working in cold rooms," he said, adding that wood-burning stoves had been installed in as many rooms as funds allowed.

As for the orphanage clinic, Wahaj said that it was perfectly well equipped, and staff would take children to hospital if requested. And while the meals available at Tahia-e Maskan might not be gourmet-standard, he claimed they were more than adequate.

"We act according to dietary guidelines. Before distribution, the meals are checked by the duty doctor and only then given out," he said.

Wahaj also denied claims by some children that they faced physical abuse at the institution.

"We treat the children in line with all national and international laws on children's rights," he said. "No one has the right to beat children."

However Farhad, not his real name, told IWPR that children faced a thrashing for even minor misdemeanors.

"The staff beat us using cables, electrical wires and sticks," he said, adding that no one intervened even when small children were treated in this way.

Children needed love, beatings, Farhad said.

Abdol Jalil, a teacher at Tahia-e Maskan for the past 12 years, insisted that if children misbehaved they were forced to carry out duties such as cleaning toilets, bedrooms or the yard, and were not beaten.

"These tasks are designed to reform them," he said, adding that each day was run according to a tight schedule.

"We constantly monitor the implementation of their educational programs. We don't allow the children to waste their time," he continued, noting that as well as the usual subjects, the orphans had access to computer, science, art, calligraphy and English-language courses, as well as vocational options.

Tahia-e Maskan, in the northwest of Kabul, is used to house young and adolescent boys. Conditions at Kabul's other orphanage, located in Alauddin in the southwest, seem far better.

Home to 350 young boys and girls, the bedrooms are tidy and well-kept and the playground is clean.

There, the childrens' main fear appears to be what will happen to them when they leave the institution.

"Everything is organized here. Our only concern is where to go and what to do after we graduate from year 12 and leave the orphanage," said Nuria, 17, who has lived in the orphanage for the last seven years, adding that she would like to study abroad.

"Now that I am graduating from 12th grade, I do not know where to go," added Omed, an 18-year-old from Badakhshan. "I have nowhere to live. I don't know what to do. The government should consider this problem as well."

There are some 70 orphanages in Afghanistan, half of them state-run and the rest private.

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) confirmed that mistreatment of children in orphanages was widespread. Hanifa Maruf, a child rights support worker at AIHRC's regional office, said beatings were common in orphanages as well as in mainstream schools.

"The commission has recorded such cases. Although the commission has signed a memorandum of understanding with the education ministry according to which children must not be beaten at schools or orphanages, unfortunately it has continued," she said.

She too agreed that children were often enrolled at orphanages through contacts rather than real need.

Demand for orphanage places remains high.

Sitting draped in a tattered *burqa* in front of the gates of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, Zainab, 57, waits with her eight-year-old grandson.

She says she has been trying to enroll him in one of the Kabul orphanages for the past two months, but without success.

"If I go to the orphanage, they tell me to go to the ministry. If I go to the ministry, they tell me to go to the directorate of orphanages. They've worn me out," she said. "Some people here have told me won't get anything done unless I have contacts. Who do I have to bring as a relative?"