

News Analysis: Chemical Substance Attacks in Afghan Schools

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Summary

In the two months of April and May (2012), over a hundred schoolgirls and teachers were affected by poisoned drinking water and contaminated air at these high schools. Periodic attacks against students, teachers and schools using various methods are in practice since the Taliban was ousted by the US led allied forces.

Afghan Taliban's campaign against female education and empowerment is well known. This campaign reached new heights when unidentified poison attacks occurred targeting several girls schools located in Kapisa and Parwan provinces in April-May 2009. These attacks involved poisonous chemical substances and the victims had complained of headaches, nausea, vomiting, itching in the eyes following exposure. Again, in mid 2010, incidents of poisoning came to light in the Afghan capital, Kabul including in Esmati High School. Similar incidents have been noticed in 2012 as well. During same months of this year the reported attacks have occurred in many girls high schools including the Naheed Shaheed Girls High School and Bashirabad High School in the Takhar province. In the two months of April and May, over a hundred schoolgirls and teachers were affected by poisoned drinking water and contaminated air at these high schools. Unidentified toxic powder was used to contaminate the air in the classrooms as well as the drinking water source of these schools.

Periodic attacks against students, teachers and schools using various methods are in practice since the Taliban was ousted by the US led allied forces. In the past, Islamic radicals resorted to acid attacks against women and girls who were seen either in market places or going to schools. Additionally, there are reports of schools being bombed or burned down. The former Taliban regime in Afghanistan had banned any form of female education terming it against Islamic practice. Now out of power, these elements have been trying to implement their writ in the areas located in North East of Kabul where they continue to maintain dominant positions and where insurgency draws support from the local Pashtuns. According to the Afghan ed-

ucation ministry, extremists associated with Taliban have forcibly close down more than 500 schools in 11 provinces in which it has strong support base.

The head of Takhar's public health department confirmed in a media report that the attacks are intentional acts aimed at poisoning schoolgirls. Even though the officials were silent, largely due to fears of retribution, fingers point to pro-Taliban elements that have always been opposing female education. Thus, this act seems to be aimed at spreading fear amongst the people of the localities. Authorities also believe that this could be a part of Taliban's annual 'spring-summer offensive'.

However, from a larger perspective, two things remained unclear so far and need proper investigations by authorities: the identification of substance used and the source of the chemical.

Zabiullah Mujahid, the known Taliban spokesman denied Taliban's role in the gas attacks against girl schools in the past. After the Esmati High School incident in Kabul in August 2010, Zabiullah Mujahid said: "We have not and will never take such action against innocent girls." Even in the aftermath of latest attacks, Taliban denied carrying out such attacks. Zabihullah Mujahid told the BBC News that the Taliban condemn such actions. He reiterated that the Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban) are not involved in these alleged incidents. Meanwhile, Afghanistan's intelligence agency, the National Directorate for Security (NDS), has accused the Taliban group for poisoning and reportedly has apprehended some suspects having links with the Taliban. Investigating reporters active in the region also believed that the chemical gas attacks are very much unlikely and this could be part of some mass hysteria or a conspiracy to cripple the education system. Ac-

cording to NDS officials, one detained Taliban commander reportedly claimed responsibility behind the transportation of non lethal chemical materials from the bordering regions of Pakistan and confirmed about a complicity of insiders who assisted the militants to transfer the Chemical material inside schools.

In the case of chemical substance attacks against schools, the intent seems not to kill any girl students but plausibly to deter their parents and students from attending schools. It could also be the case that as Taliban's core does not have full control of affiliated or local groups, it is possible that hardcore elements perpetrated those attacks or conspired with insiders to achieve their objective without the knowledge of senior leadership of Taliban.

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