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Students Live in Squalor at Afghan University

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Nangarhar undergraduates sleep 25 to a four-person room.

Sebghatollah's dormitory room at Afghanistan's Nangarhar University was designed for just four students, but he has to share it with 25 others.

They sleep crammed into a 16-square-metre space, with a white plastic sheet suspended from the ceiling serving as a divider.

Plastic bags full of students' belongings hang from hooks on the wall, while outside, dogs prowl the corridors looking for leftover food and licking dirty plates.

"The students on either side of the curtain can neither sleep nor study," Sebghatollah, a second-year agriculture student from Baghlan province, told an IWPR reporter who visited the hostel. "How can you sleep or study when 26 people are talking to each other? Some are watching TV, some listening to the radio, while others talk on the phone or listen to music."

As he spoke, several students pulled the plastic sheet aside and peered through from the other side of the room.

One of them joked that suspected terrorists in United States custody enjoyed better living conditions.

“The government discusses the prisoners at Guantanamo and Bagram [detention facility] with the Americans all day, yet they’re much better off than us,” the student quipped. “The real Guantanamo is here.”

Nangarhar University, located in eastern Afghanistan, was founded in 1962, and has both male and female students at its 11 faculties, which include medicine, engineering, law, politics and economics. With more than 7,000 students and 600 staff, Nangarhar is the country’s fastest-growing university and caters to four eastern provinces of Afghanistan, although 60 per cent of students come from further afield, its website says.

While three decades of war have seriously affected the university, it now “strives hard [to deliver] high quality education, outstanding student support, and excellent personal and professional development,” chancellor Mohammad Saber says on the website.

Some argue that the university has grown too quickly and enrolled more students than it can manage, leaving it unable to guarantee them a minimal standard of living.

Some 3,000 students occupy eight dormitory buildings designed to accommodate 500, according to deputy chancellor Mohammad Ishaq Razeqi. These hostels are 11 kilometres outside the provincial capital Jalalabad, while other students are housed at different locations.

“Dormitories should provide a healthy environment,” Razeqi told IWPR. “They should be quiet and good food should be provided. Unfortunately, the dormitories at our university are not like that.”

He said the Afghan education ministry directed large numbers of students from outside the province to study at the university, and officials sometimes pressured staff to enrol more students than the dormitories could accommodate.

“So more than 20 people live in rooms that are only good for four,” he said.

Near Sebghatollah’s room, three students were sluicing away foul water overflowing from the toilets and spilling into the corridor.

Sebghatollah said that when the toilets are blocked, the contents flow into the students’ rooms.

Last year, sewage mixed with drinking water and many students fell ill, he said.

“Look at the life of university-level people are leading in our country,” he added.

Razeqi confirmed that the hostels’ sewerage system was broken.

Baz Mohammad Sherzad, provincial director of public health, said students and staff were ultimately responsible for keeping the dormitories clean.

During IWPR's visit, several mangy dogs were resting in the shade beneath trees, while ditches full of foetid water ran close by the canteen.

Samiollah, a second-year agriculture student, said he was afraid to leave the dormitory at night for fear the dogs would attack him.

Razeqi said he had contacted provincial health officials several times asking them to do something about the stray dogs, without success.

Sherzad said public health officers rounded up stray dogs from Jalalabad, including those around the dormitories, every three months. But he added, "If [students and staff] didn't feed the dogs, and drove them away instead, the dogs wouldn't get used to living there."

Raz Mohammad Faizi, a lecturer in education at the university, said that students were partly to blame for the squalor of their dormitories.

"They don't take care of their food, dishes or beds. The government can't be held responsible for everything. The students should take pride [in their surroundings] as well."

But he added that nowhere else in the world would ten or 20 university students be expected to share one room, and the current conditions were undermining students' ability to study.

"Two, three or four students should live in each room. They should be provided with an environment in which to study, access to the internet and a calm atmosphere," he said.

Sebghatollah brings his own blankets and mattress from home because those provided by the dormitory are dirty and insubstantial.

"They're completely unusable. You wouldn't get through the winter with them," he said.

Sebghatollah also had tough words for the canteen's cooks, as he sometimes suffers from an upset stomach, and has even come across shards of glass in the food.

Razeqi said there was hope in sight, in the shape of a new dormitory with room for 3,000 people.

University officials had "knocked on many doors" seeking donations for the dormitory over the past decade, but it has now been completed and will open in the near future.

For now, students who can afford to pay rent often choose to live in private accommodation.

Nazifollah, a student of literature, shares a room in Jalalabad with four friends, for which they pay 70 US dollars per month.

"When we saw what things were like in the dormitory, we agreed we should leave," he said. "This place is better. We are here to study."