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## 17 Takhar schoolgirls ill after suspected gas attack

April 18, 2013

At least 17 high school girls fell ill and lost consciousness after a suspected poisonous gas attack at their school in Taloqan, the capital of northern Takhar province, officials said on Thursday.

The female students of 8th, 11th and 12th grade at the Bibi Hawa Girls' High school smell a poisoning gas on Thursday morning at classrooms before falling unconscious, the education department spokesman Gul Agha Nazari told Pajhwok Afghan News.

Some students started crying seeing their class fellows falling on the ground before education department employees took them to a hospital with the help of police, he said.

Public health director Dr. Hafizullah Safi said 16 girls were brought to the hospital and many of them were now in stable condition.

He said they were investigating what had happened to the girls, but it remained unclear what kind of substance was used.

Last year, nearly 700 female students in Takhar, including those of Bibi Hajira School, were poisoned by drinking contaminated water and smelling a poisonous gas.

Some 160 schoolgirls had fallen ill and lost consciousness in a similar attack on May 29 last year at the Ahan Dara Girls' High School in Toloqan. That incident was the fourth alleged attack on a school in the area in a month time.

At that time, affected girls said they smelled something as they entered classrooms and started to vomit and fell unconscious.

Intelligence officials say the Taliban were behind such attacks on schools and students in an attempt to intimidate families to stop sending their children to school.

Several other major poisonings have been reported last year, including one affecting more than 120 schoolgirls in the same province on May 23.

Another attack targeted a boys' school in Khost in April 2012, leaving more than 200 students ill.

The Education Ministry says 550 schools have been closed down because of security concerns, affecting 300,000 students in 11 provinces.

President Karzai has called on tribal and religious leaders to encourage the education of girls.