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Parents balk at 'suicide' schools

By Arash Kabuli
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KAPISA PROVINCE - Wednesday's killing of the mayor of Afghanistan's southern city of Kandahar, Ghulam Haydar Hamidi, has once again thrown the spotlight on suicide bombings and the people who carry them out. The attack took place at Hamidi's office compound.

A spokesman for the provincial governor told Radio Free Europe/Liberty that the bomber entered the courtyard of the Kandahar city hall by pretending he was with a group of tribal elders who were there to discuss a land dispute with the mayor. The assailant reportedly had explosives hidden in his turban and detonated them after requesting a meeting with the mayor. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the killing.

Even before the latest attack, Afghan families with children studying at Islamic schools or *madrassas* across the border in Pakistan are starting to bring them home for fear that they will be recruited as suicide bombers.

Public awareness of the issue has grown since Afghan television stations showed children describing how their teachers in Pakistan groomed them to put on vests packed with explosives and detonate them once they approached vehicles belonging to international or Afghan troops. But their testimonies suggest they were told that they themselves would escape unharmed from such attacks.

In Kapisa province northeast of the capital Kabul, the families of 17 boys have either recalled them from Pakistani *madrassas* or are refusing to let them go back there.

One father described how he sent his 18-year-old son to Pakistan a year ago, but observed great changes in him when he returned for a break.

"My son is vehemently opposed to the government. He says suicide attacks are considered a superior form of martyrdom and courage in Islam, and that Muslims must wage a jihad against the Jews and their friends," he said.

His son told him that on Fridays, the *madrassa* students were shown footage of Americans and Britons being beheaded. The father concluded, "I'm not going to allow my son to go back to study in Pakistan again, because I know I will lose him."

Although now associated with the Taliban - whose name reflects their origin as Islamic students - *madrassas* in Pakistan, and before that British India, have long attracted Afghans in search of a religious education.

When Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and the West responded by backing the mujahideen, *madrassas* along the Pakistani side of the border played a major role in galvanizing Islamic feeling. This was to backfire when the same *madrassas* generated the Taliban movement in the 1990s and, after 2001, preached jihad against the Afghan government and its Western allies.

Many Afghan families now fear their children will be caught up in an insurgent strategy of recruiting young people for suicide attacks, as they are both more malleable and less easy to spot than adults.

A 17-year-old in Laghman province, east of Kapisa, who was home on vacation from a *madrassa* in Peshawar, described the teaching there.

"We were always being told that the Jews and Christians had attacked Muslim countries. They destroy the dignity and faith of Muslims. We were shown footage of the Americans searching people's homes and killing them ... or killing civilians in bombardments. They showed us Israeli massacres in Palestine," he said. "Young people, even children, were therefore prepared to wage jihad against the United States."

The young man said he was keen to return to Peshawar, but his parents had forbidden him to do so and he would have to obey them.

A member of the Taliban shadow administration that is now present in Kapisa, as in many other provinces, justified the recruitment of young people and denied that they were brainwashed.

"Those who say these people are being deceived are puppets of the US. During their studies in Pakistani *madrassas*, people learn the path of virtue and jihad," the Taliban official said.

"They come to understand the reality that human beings are guests in this world for just a few days, and that they must do something for their religion and the next life. They learn the Islamic precepts in which jihad has high status, and thus they arrive at practical action - they fight for the

interests of Islam, they satisfy their God, and they bring illumination to the next life."

Alarmed about Pakistani schools it believes are turning out young suicide bombers, the Afghan government has responded by building *madrassas* at home.

A spokesman for Afghanistan's Education Ministry, Abdul Sabur Ghofrani, said Islamic schooling was being taken very seriously and the department concerned had been upgraded to being a deputy minister's office. "We have 650 *madrassas* and other religious schools across the country, and this number will rise to 1,000 in the next three years," he said.

The deputy head of education for Kapisa province, Abdul Rasul Safi, said there were now 14 religious schools there, one for each administrative district and the rest in the main town, Mahmud-i Raqi. Altogether, they catered for over 800 students, he said.

In one district, Tagab, police chief Pacha Gol Bakhtiar said, "The people have promised not to send their children to Pakistan, and we have promised to establish *madrassas* for them here and train them under the supervision of Afghan scholars."

Choosing the right clerics as teachers will be a task in itself. One Islamic scholar in Kabul, who did not want his name to be used, justified the use of suicide attacks against "infidel countries".

Accusing US and Israeli forces of a list of abuses against the Palestinians and in Lebanon and Iraq, the cleric asked, "Does it make sense to sit quietly in the face of such a pharaoh? As long as the cruelty of the Americans and their friends continues, suicide attacks and other dangerous tactics are both legal and legitimate."

The new *madrassas* come too late for Taj Mohammad, who lives in Sarobi district south of Kabul but told his story to the Institute for War and Peace Reporting while on a visit to Kapisa.

He described how his wife sent him off to Pakistan to get their 14-year-old son back immediately she heard news reports that children were being trained up as suicide bombers.

"When I got to Pakistan, I stayed in the *madrassa* for two or three nights. My son's classmates told me that he'd gone off to another *madrassa* for some kind of competition and that he'd be back. They used various excuses to deceive me," Taj Mohammad said, tears rolling down his face.

"On the third day, the head of the *madrassa* told me that my son had been martyred in the jihad, and that I had God's blessing. After hearing this news, I was lost to the world; I passed out."

Returning home, Taj Mohammad avoided telling his wife for a few days, but finally had to come out with the truth. "Since that day, my wife has been stricken and cannot move from her bed," he said.