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GIRLS' EDUCATION KEY TO REBUILDING AFGHANISTAN, ADVOCATE SAYS

Washington DC: The founder of an innovative program for girls' education in Afghanistan is urging the international community to not give up on the country as its security situation worsens, saying that more development is crucial to long-term stability.

"I believe that education is the key solution to the Afghan problem," said Sadiqa Basiri, a co-founder of the Oruj Learning Center. "We cannot let the education sector die as it did during the Taliban time."

Ms Basiri brought her message to Washington last week, meeting with officials at the Afghan embassy and USAID, and giving a presentation at Georgetown University. Her presentation was covered by [Alhurra TV](#), an Arabic-language Voice of America news network that broadcasts in the Middle East.

The Oruj Learning Center began in 2002 with 36 students, and now serves more than 2,700 girls in six different schools. The Advocacy Project (AP) has worked with Oruj since 2005, but does not currently send Peace Fellows to the organization because of the security situation in Afghanistan.

Ms Basiri said education has improved in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Currently, about 6.4 million children in Afghanistan attend schools. Thirty-five percent of these schools serve girls.

But there is still a long way to go for girls' education in the country. Right now, she said, only five out of every 35 high school graduates are women.

Part of the struggle is convincing Afghan parents about the value of education for their daughters. Ms Basiri said Oruj spends from six months to two years in a community creating trust and awareness, before establishing a school there. She said she stresses to parents that educating girls is not a Western imposition, but a responsibility grounded in the Muslim faith. She cites passages from the Koran that explain to parents their duty to educate their children.

It is also difficult to find teachers, especially out in the provinces of Afghanistan. Ms Basiri mentioned the example of one village of 12,000 where she couldn't find a single woman who could read or write. Other issues include providing education for girls who are engaged to be married, or girls who must look after younger siblings.

From 2001 to 2005, Afghanistan experienced an influx of international aid, creating hope in the education sector. However, since 2005, the Taliban has re-emerged in some provinces, 6,800

schools have been shut down, many school buildings have been destroyed, and 13,000 teachers now sit idle without work.

“That is devastating,” Ms Basiri said. “Instead of going toward progress, we are just going backward.”

Recently, several schools were moved into private homes for security reasons. Of Oruj’s six schools, three operate in private homes or property, two are in government buildings, and one is held in a mosque. Despite the dangers, particularly in the south of the country where the Taliban has the most control, she said girls are committed to continuing their education.

Ms Basiri hopes the international community will share in that commitment. At Georgetown, she urged attendees to write letters to US lawmakers supporting development, and not just war, in Afghanistan.

“If the West would like to see Afghanistan as a success story, and Afghanistan as a stable state, there has to be a different mechanism,” she said.