

ARSON FAILS TO DAMPEN ENTHUSIASM FOR GIRLS EDUCATION IN REMOTE AFGHANISTAN

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Washington, DC: Early in June, unknown assailants set fire to two of the four tents and much of the equipment for the Godah primary school for girls in the remote province of Wardak Afghanistan. By the end of July, the tents had been replaced, attendance at the school had increased, and the villagers had rallied behind the school.

The fire is the latest challenge to be met and overcome by Godah, one of four girls' schools being supported by the Afghan Omid Learning Center, a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP). Funding for the schools - which provide education for 990 students - has been provided by an anonymous donor who learned about Godah from the AP website.

During a recent assessment visit to the Godah school, Shirin Sahani, an AP intern from Georgetown University who is working with Omid this summer, found that the students had refused to be intimidated by the fire. They had attended classes on open ground for almost two months, braving dust and temperatures of up to 38 degrees.

With the two tents replaced, says Ms. Sahani, the students are attending "in full force" and new students have even registered. In addition, the village has donated land for a permanent structure to replace the tents. "We have to keep the school going," she writes to AP. "If the project fails, girls' education will suffer a setback."

The Godah school was opened in late 2002 by Sadiqa Basiri, then 24, who paid teachers from her own salary until funding was secured. It is the first girls' school in Godah's history and serves 1200 families in the surrounding 18 villages. Many of Godah's 115 students walk more than an hour each way to attend classes.

The June fire occurred late at night and would have destroyed the entire school if the guard had not been awoken by the smell of gasoline and managed to save two tents and equipment. The arsonists have still not been identified.

At first there were concerns that the fire was connected to the anti-Western backlash that swept Afghanistan after reports of prisoner abuse in Iraq. Equally serious was the possibility that conservative elements in Godah were making a statement against girls' education. Ms. Basiri has relied on the support of the community in developing the Godah program, to the extent of contacting parents whose children skip school.

In the event, the fire has produced a surge of support in Godah and abroad. Staff from the Women's Commission for Refugee Women in New York raised \$2,149 at a special fundraiser for

Omid, allowing Omid to replace the tents and equipment. The US Afghan Reconstruction Council (ARC) paid for the lost chairs and desks.

At the same time, the fire has underlined the importance of building a permanent school in Godah, which will be less vulnerable to the weather and criminal attacks than tents. Omid will launch a special appeal, with help from The Advocacy Project, in the autumn.

The fire has driven home the need to bring the Godah school into the government education system and hand it over to the Ministry of Education once Omid's private grant runs out. Registration - which will also make it easier to hire women teachers for the Godah school - has been repeatedly held up by government bureaucracy.

- Read Shirin Sahani's [report](#) on the Godah fire.
- Find out more about the Godah school in Shirin Sahani 's [blog](#).