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Afghanistan: Taliban deny children being used as suicide bombers

KABUL, 23 May 2011 (IRIN) - About 100 boys aged 12-17 are being detained by Afghanistan's National Intelligence Directorate (NDS) on charges of attempting suicide attacks on behalf of the Taliban, but the insurgents deny they recruit minors as their presence could cause "vice" in the ranks.

On 20 May, a suicide vest strapped to a 12-year-old boy in the eastern province of Nooristan prematurely exploded, killing several suspected insurgents including the boy, NDS and the provincial authorities allege.

"About 100 would-be child suicide attackers are currently in our custody," Lutfullah Mashal, an NDS spokesman, told IRIN, adding that the children had been trained by the Taliban, Hezbe Islami and the Haqqani Group - the three main insurgent groups which are also accused by the [UN](#) of using children for military purposes, including suicide missions.

"We have evidence that the Taliban have been recruiting children aged 11-17 to carry out a range of activities - from armed combat to smuggling of weapons across the Pakistan-Afghan border and planting IEDs [improvised explosive devices]," said Dee Brillenburg Wurth, a child rights adviser with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

The Taliban reject the allegations about the Nooristan blast: "Can they [the government] really determine the age of a suicide attacker instantly after an incident and from his mutilated corpse?" asked Zabihullah Mujahid, a purported Taliban spokesman. He also denied children were being used as suicide attackers or for other military purposes.

"We have no need to use children since there are too many older Mujahedin who have enlisted for martyrdom attacks," he said.

About 140 suicide attacks were carried out in 2010 in Afghanistan resulting in at least 228 civilian deaths, [reports UNAMA](#).

Article 1 of the 1989 [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) stipulates that "every human being below the age of eighteen years" is a child, and Afghan law forbids the recruitment of minors into armed forces or the police.

However, jihad - the term used by the Taliban to describe their armed insurgency in Afghanistan - does not require participants to be older than a certain age; they need only to be beyond the age of puberty and mentally fit, according to Islamic scholars.

"It's our policy not to recruit children - in order to prevent vice in our ranks because most Mujahedin are single men and spend a lot of their time away from their homes, so

the policy is to avoid any child sexual abuse in our forces,” said the Taliban spokesman.

Child sexual exploitation, so-called ‘bacha bazi’, is an illegal but widespread practice in some parts of Afghanistan and the [UN has called on the government to stop it](#).

Pakistan link?

The Afghan authorities believe most child suicide bombers are trained in Pakistan.

“Ninety-nine percent of the children detained on charges of suicide attack have come from Pakistan where they were indoctrinated, trained and equipped in religious schools and other insurgency training camps,” alleged NDS spokesman Mashal, but the Pakistani authorities have always rejected such claims.

[Other reports](#) also suggest extremist religious groups may be preaching armed jihad against foreign forces in Afghanistan.

UNAMA said it has been conducting research to try and collate data on cross-border child recruitment by state and non-state military actors.

But the UN acknowledges it is very difficult to monitor and report on the recruitment of children in non-state armed forces because of lack of access. “And some of it is cross-border as well, so those are the difficulties we face,” said Radhika Coomaraswamy, special representative of the Secretary-General for children and armed conflict, at a press conference in Kabul on 24 February 2010.
