



Back to school in Afghanistan under threat of violence

By: Faiz Mohammad Fayyaz YC

FMF - Schools in northern and central Afghanistan reopened Saturday as the education ministry said it planned to expand a protection scheme after unrest left 220 pupils and teachers dead last year.

Most killings were in the south where the warmer climate means classes continue through the just-ended winter and where the threat of Taliban-linked unrest is keeping 300,000 children out of school, a spokesman said.

More than 500,000 new enrollments were expected in the northern and central areas this school year, spokesman Hamid Elmi told, taking the number of children in school nationwide to 6.2 million.

This compares with about one million enrollments five years ago, although half of Afghan children -- mostly girls -- are still not in school, according to the United Nations.

"Last year we lost 220 students and teachers in the violence," Elmi told. This included in a suicide bombing in the northern province of Baghlan in November that killed nearly 60 students.

Insurgents, some linked to the 1996-2001 Taliban government that did not allow girls to go to school or women to teach, also destroyed dozens of schools last year.

Already at least three have been attacked this year, the last a newly completed school torched on March 14 in the southern province of Kandahar.

Elmi said "protection councils" were in place at 3,000 schools in the volatile south and more would be established nationwide this year to "exclude them from political skirmishes."

"Through this we hope to protect the schools and education institutions, the councils are made up of parents and education officials as well as elders who are influential in their communities.

The ministry also planned to build an extra 1,150 schools countrywide which would accommodate 1.4 million students

the post-Taliban government is praised for making great strides in improving access to education in Afghanistan, where around 70 percent of adults are illiterate.