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Progress being made in Kandahar

KANDAHAR CITY (Online): Hidden within the confines of a cobblestone courtyard, and just beyond the flaps of a large white tent, progress is quietly being made in Kandahar City. Within those walls, a class of young girls were doing what their counterparts could mostly only dream about just a few years ago - getting a daily education. "The girls have joined the school since the Taliban regime collapsed and this new regime took over," Abdul Aziz, the school's principal said. "Fortunately, when we got the Islamic Republic state of Afghanistan, they put more attention towards education and training." Aziz, who runs a mixed girls and boys school for almost 1,600 children in downtown Kandahar, acknowledged in an interview he faces great personal risk for running the school, but added it is something he feels he must do. "In some cases there are threats towards me but I must say that I am not scared and afraid of that," he said. "The key thing is it is a holy task that we are performing right now, working as a teacher. We will continue our job no matter what." More than 40 teachers have reportedly been killed by the Taliban in the last 12 months, all in an apparent attempt to rattle this country's already shaky education system. The teachers, who taught in both grade schools and universities, were mostly from southern Afghanistan, says one report that cites information provided by Education Minister Mohammad Hanif Atmar. When asked why Aziz continues to take on the risk to run a school, especially one that teaches girls, he said he does it because he wants to serve his country. "Education is very important to stability in Afghanistan. It is very positive," he said Tuesday through an interpreter. "Schools are one of the very important sources. If we have schools it means we are going to have a very bright future." In one class of almost 30 young girls at Aziz's school on Tuesday, many of the students spoke proudly and confidently of their ambitions, and of their plans for the future. "Engineer," said one girl when asked what career she wants to pursue. "Doctor," added another. "Teacher," called out a third. It was a scene that would have been virtually unthinkable under a Taliban regime, one where women could only study the Koran until age eight, and then were banned from any kind of education. Aziz, who became a teacher about five years ago, said part of the reason he is able to operate his school is because the security situation in Kandahar City has been getting continually better. It was a position officials at Canada's Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar said reflected what they see happening throughout the city. "The city itself is best described, I think, as improving, but cautiously improving," Lt.-Col. Bob Chamberlain, commander of the PRT said in an interview. "There will be times where there are setbacks. There's going to be continued attacks. There's going to be, based on the tactics we are seeing, some bad deeds that happen - assassinations and the like will be attempted." That in mind, Chamberlain noted he does see tangible signs of progress. "Most Kandaharians feel comfortable walking around at night, whereas before it was really bandit country at night," he said. "I don't see mass widespread terror among Kandaharians." On Tuesday, soldiers from the PRT brought almost 130 pairs of new shoes, pens and notebooks to Aziz's school that he could hand out to children. The shoes were sent to Afghanistan by Sonya Bata, co-founder of Bata Shoes, Canadian officials said, explaining they were part of a donation of about 500 shoes meant for poor or orphaned Afghan children. "I am very happy," said Hayatullah, 9, an orphan and student who wants to be a doctor. "I didn't have any shoes. These are very nice and very good looking," he



added as he pulled on a new pair of shiny black leather shoes. Watching the students enjoy their new shoes, Aziz stood back with a smile. "I'm very happy we have the international community assisting us and helping us with a lot of things," he said. "We are a poor country and we have been at war for the last three to four decades and we really need help." Before military officials left, however, the principal made one final request. "We need a good building for a school," he said, pointing out the schools' 11 tents are not sufficient to even carry the current load. "If we have a good building and more classes I believe the numbers could increase to 3,000 or 4,000 students."

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