

# A Thirst for Education

## Thirst for education has quadrupled school enrollments

In Mazar-i Sharif, the Nau Behar School used to have 400 students when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, just three years ago. This August, 2,500 students enrolled according to headmaster Ghulam Yashiya. Hundreds of children—boys along with girls—packed the street in front of the school waiting for their shift to begin. Three shifts plus several tents in the playground are needed to cope with the new thirst for education. Although the school was newly painted and rehabilitated under a USAID grant, it will require enlargement to accommodate the new students, many back from refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran. Other parents simply realized, with the Taliban gone, that reading, writing and math will help their children a lot more than the fundamentalist religious studies the Taliban favored—and allowed only to boys.

In another part of Mazar-i Sharif, which sits astride the Silk Road linking China with Europe in ancient times, Anif Azhari, 15, sits in his classroom at the Lycee Bakhter and opens up a book printed by USAID and distributed by the UN throughout the country. "We all want to go to the university and become doctors or engineers and serve our country," said Azhari, as his classmates nod in agreement. Here, too, outdoor tents add space for the overflow students.

Aid groups are pouring more than \$100 million into new textbooks, rehabilitating or building new schools, helping more than 170,000 students catch up from the lost years when the Taliban ruled, and training more than 20,000 teachers by radio programs and seminars. U.S. funds earlier helped publish millions of Afghan school books which were distributed by the United Nations in time for the first school year after the Taliban were routed.

At Kabul University, the United States gave \$9 million to build a giant dormitory for 1,100 women students. It rises just a few dozen yards from the crumbling ruins left behind by years of warfare.

In Balkh University in Mazar-i Sharif, the major learning institution in northern Afghanistan, the United States has offered to build a new faculty of agriculture.

"I want to study engineering so I can build apartments and schools and help people," said Zahiruddin, 17, sitting with friends

in the university library. "The teachers are good but we have 300 students in a class. We need a lot more books for the library."

While no women were allowed to study until the Taliban were ousted in 2001, now 40 percent of students are women such as engineering student Shekiba Khoram, 22.

"Some people don't want women to have the same rights as men," she said. "Rights are not given. We should get it. We should try to get our freedom, our rights."

"We face lots of problems. In some places we are not allowed to go alone. In some places there are forced marriages. I don't have problems, but other girls do." She is working with a group arranging meetings to protect against forced marriages.

"We don't need money—we just need spiritual support," she said.

According to the head of grants at the Ministry of Education, Najmuddin Saqib, 42, the main aid donors to education include the World Bank, the United States, Japan, the Asian Development Bank, France, and Denmark.

"We started working from zero—there was no system you could call education," said Saqib in an interview in his office. "Our schools were converted to madrassas or military training for Taliban. There were 900,000 students from primary to college. One percent were female. Now there are five million students, about 40 percent of them female."

In many districts, officials say that although they have 200 or 300 schools, only 10 or 15 percent have buildings. The rest meet under a tree or crude shelter.

Saqib said: "We started developing a new curriculum framework. Now we start writing textbooks. We hope to print new ones with four colors like every European country. We're doing grades one and four. Later we'll do the others." Columbia University in New York is working with UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank on the textbook project.

Afghanistan has 102,000 teachers but needs 30,000 more, especially in rural areas, he said. Columbia University is helping out by training the teachers as well as school principals and education planners in the ministry.

"Foreign assistance is extremely essential," said Saqib. "In two years we built 1,800 new schools. We trained 50,000 teachers last year. We plan to train 105,000 teachers in the next six months. For this we need \$27 million and we already have \$12 million available."

### Results

- Millions of girls barred from school by the Taliban since 1995 have returned to their classes. Today, 40 percent of all students are female.
- Enrollment in all schools, from primary to college, jumped from 900,000 in 2001 to 5 million. Many are among the 3.7 million refugees who returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran.
- 15 million textbooks were printed and distributed for the fall, 2002 school year.
- 1,800 schools were built by Afghan and foreign aid agencies.
- 50,000 teachers were trained.
- A dormitory for 1,100 women has been built at Kabul University.



Boys attend class in a tent at Nau Behar School in Mazar-i Sharif. Enrollment leaped from 400 students in 2001 to 2,500 students in

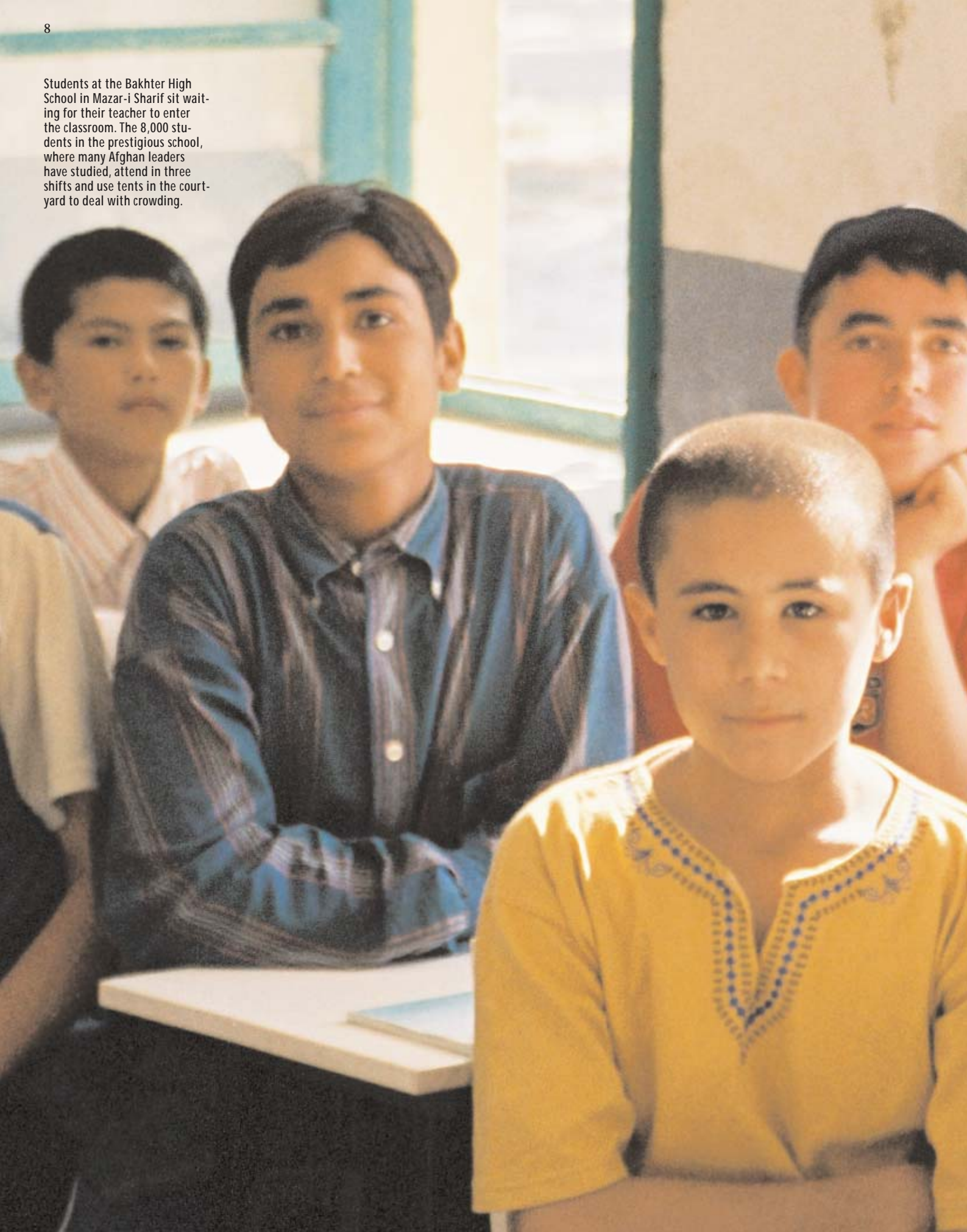
2004 after girls were allowed to return to classes and refugees returned from abroad.



Workman finishing up the large new dormitory for women at Kabul University built by USAID. The univer-

sity stands in a heavily damaged part of the city that was a frontline for factional fighting in the 1990s.

Students at the Bakhter High School in Mazar-i Sharif sit waiting for their teacher to enter the classroom. The 8,000 students in the prestigious school, where many Afghan leaders have studied, attend in three shifts and use tents in the courtyard to deal with crowding.



September '02

Karzai escapes  
assassination attempt

October '02

Disarmament project  
begins in north



Ben Barber/USAID

**November '02**

Night curfew in Kabul lifted for first time in 23 years

Drafting of new constitution begins

Factions begin surrendering weapons under UN program

Work begins on highway projects

**December '02**

Regional leaders sign pipeline accord

EU spends 275 million Euros in 2002

1st Provincial Reconstruction Team created