

Afghan teachers' strike demands higher pay

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Teachers in Afghanistan have been on strike for ten days at schools in the capital city of Kabul and several provinces around the country. They are demanding increased pay, and protesting the government's renegeing on promises to provide teachers with plots of land and loans to build their homes.

For all of the claims about expanding democracy since the overthrow of the Taliban, strikes and protests in Afghanistan are rare occurrences under the repressive US-backed regime in Kabul. The strike, which began on Sunday, May 31, spread throughout the capital, with rallies and sit-ins over the last nine days, and has also reached into several provinces across the country.

The country's 200,000 teachers are among the lowest paid instructors in the world—earning between 7000 Afghanis (US\$120.73) and 13,000 Afghanis (US\$224.22) a month—forcing many to take other jobs. To add insult to injury, the meager salaries of teachers are often held up for months due to the perpetual fiscal crisis of the government.

The strike began in at least 15 schools in Kabul and spread to 80 schools in the capital, the newly appointed head of the national teachers council, Fazel Ahmad Fazel, told the Associated Press. He said teachers had also walked out in at least 18 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. Announcing the strike, Fazel said, "All our demands are legitimate and we will not attend classes until we get our rights. We are very sad because of our students, but this government has left us no other choice."

Protesting teachers say President Ashraf Ghani has failed to honor promises he made when he was elected in September 2014 to increase the salary of teachers and provide each with a piece of land within six months. The president also promised to form a commission to bring about changes to the civil service laws and issue teachers long-term loans to construct

homes for themselves. *Tolo News* reported that the ministers of education and of urban development announced Tuesday that 300 hectares of land in Istalif district, 18 miles northwest of the capital, had been allocated for teachers in Kabul, while those in Ghazni, Uruzgan and other provinces would get their plots in the near future.

In his opening address at a government ceremony, Minister of Education Asadullah Hanifi Balkhi acknowledged the teachers' issues but said he had inherited the problem from the previous government, according to the news agency. Balkhi claimed 80,000 teachers have been given plots of land throughout the country and that others would soon receive theirs.

But one teacher, who has received his plot of land, told *Tolo News* he is not happy with the scheme. "The plot I got is at the top of a mountain. How can I build on it with only 8,000 Afghanis which I am being paid a month. Except animals, no human being can live there," Akbar said.

Teachers said they would continue striking until their demands were met. "We are grappling with a number of problems. If our problems are not addressed, we may not be able to teach the students in a good manner," a teacher from Istalif, Bacha Khan, told *Tolo News*.

The AP reported that Education Ministry spokesman Kabir Haqmal said some of the teachers' demands are unreasonable and that they have been asked to return to class while the negotiations proceed. "For a long time we have been doing our best to improve conditions for teachers across the country, but it is a process and needs more time," Haqmal said. He said teachers' grievances should be addressed jointly by the parliament and the Education Ministry and insisted that students were suffering from the strike, according to the AP.

Ahmadullah Alkozai, a striking teacher from Kabul's Ghazi high school, told the AP he has been teaching for

27 years and still doesn't own a home. He is among 180 teachers at the now-closed school, which has 4,500 students. "I am so upset for my students that the school is closed, but I had no other choice," he said, adding that the strike will continue until the teachers' demands are met.

According to the Human Development Index, Afghanistan was the 15th least developed country in the world in 2011. Of its 30 million people, 36 percent live below the poverty line, leaving the country second only to Bangladesh as Asia's poorest nation. Fully 72 percent are illiterate, and only 36 percent of the poorest Afghans attend primary school. Nearly two million children between the ages of six and 17 are forced to work in brick making, carpet weaving, construction, mining, farming and other jobs, and are deprived of the right to an education, according to UNICEF.

After ravaging the country with a 13-year military occupation, drone massacres and other crimes, and funneling billions of dollars to American corporations in no-bid contracts, the United States reduced foreign aid to Afghanistan by 50 percent in 2014.



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