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Afghanistan: Teen Describes Madrasah Effort To Make Him A Suicide Bomber



Shakirullah was interviewed at a detention center run by the Afghan intelligence service (RFE/RL)

KABUL/PRAGUE -- Ever since he was caught three months ago in Afghanistan's Khost Province trying to carry out a suicide attack, 14-year-old Shakirullah has been pondering how he went from childhood in Pakistan to imprisonment in Kabul as an international terrorist.

Just one year ago, Shakirullah was living with his family in his native tribal region of South Waziristan, in Pakistan. The world Shakirullah knew in his village of Jandul revolved around his father, Noor Ali Khan, his mother, and three older brothers.

But Shakirullah's childhood in the rugged mountain region near the Afghan border came to a dramatic end last fall when his family sent him to a religious boarding school -- the nearby Salib madrasah in South Waziristan -- to receive instruction from conservative Islamist clerics.

The boy says teachers had taught him the Koran for half a year, then gave him an explosives-packed suicide vest and took him across the border into Afghanistan.

Shakirullah was picked up before he could blow himself up near U.S. troops, a mission that minders at his Pakistani madrasah assured him would bring him eternal life.

He is now being held at a facility run by Afghanistan's national intelligence service -- a detention center that keeps the teenager separated from older Taliban fighters, hardened criminals, and convicted murderers.

'Never Die'

When Afghan officials allowed RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan into the facility to interview Shakirullah, the boy describes a militant network in Pakistan that "forced" him to become a suicide bomber. The teen also directly implicates clerics at the madrasah as being part of that network.

"[I was attending] Salib madrasah. About 50 other people were attending," Shakirullah said. "The teachers were all from Pakistan. I was there for five or six months."

Shakirullah says that his instruction focused entirely on the Koran while he was at the madrasah. But he says the clerics started urging him to become a suicide bomber after he finished studying the Koran.

Shakirullah also says several of the teachers at the madrasah told him that he would "never die" if he sacrificed himself as a suicide bomber in neighboring Afghanistan.

According to Shakirullah, his teachers increased their pressure on him to commit a suicide-bomb attack after he asked to see his mother and father. He says his teachers told him he was not allowed to see his parents before the attack, but assured him that he would "come back" to see them afterward.

Shakirullah identifies a teacher at the madrasah named Azizullah as the person who transported him across the border into Afghanistan's Khost Province, urging him to blow himself up. He says Azizullah also provided him with an explosives-laden vest and instructed him to detonate the device when he got close to a group of U.S. soldiers.

"They told me to go to Afghanistan and carry out a suicide attack and that I would come back," Shakirullah says. "[Azizullah] didn't allow me to inform my family. I was forced to come [to Afghanistan]. When I finished [studying] the Koran, they told me, 'Now you carry out a suicide attack and you will come back to visit your parents.' Then I was brought to Afghanistan."

Close Call

Authorities in Kabul say troops from the Afghan National Army first noticed the teenager as he was walking alone toward a security checkpoint in Khost Province.

Observing that the boy was acting confused and was wearing a suspiciously oversized vest, the Afghan soldiers stopped Shakirullah from detonating the explosives. Instead, they took him into custody for questioning.

Shakirullah says his Afghan jailers have treated him well and that he has not been abused or tortured during the many interrogation sessions he has undergone.

He says that in the three months since his arrest, he has had plenty of time to think about how his teachers at the madrasah took advantage of his impressionable age.

Shakirullah now says the madrasah teachers lied to him -- giving him "bad advice and trying to kill me along with other Muslims."

As for the future, Shakirullah says he is happy just to be alive and safe. But he says he wants to continue his studies to better understand how he was led astray by the madrasah teachers. The boy also says that he misses his mother and wants desperately to see her again.

*reported by RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan correspondent Rezwan Murad in Kabul and Jan Alekozai in Prague;
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