



Students of the Mirwais school for girls in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Undeterred by the risk of violent attacks from Islamic extremists, students are refusing to be intimidated out of their chance to receive an education.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

## Acid attack victims undaunted

Two months after 11 Afghan girls were assaulted outside their school, the students are back and refuse to be intimidated

BY DEXTER FILKINS  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN

One morning two months ago, Shamsia Husseini and her sister were walking through the muddy streets to the local girls school when a man pulled alongside them on a motorcycle and posed what seemed like an ordinary question.

"Are you going to school?" Then the man pulled Shamsia's burqa from her head and sprayed her face with burning acid. Scars, jagged and discolored, now spread across Shamsia's eyelids and most of her left cheek. These days, her vision goes blurry, making it hard for her to read.

But if the acid attack against Shamsia and 14 others — students and teachers — was meant to terrorize the girls into staying home, it appears to have completely failed.

Today, nearly all of the wounded girls are back at the Mirwais School for Girls, including even Shamsia, whose face was so badly burned that she had to be sent abroad for treatment. Perhaps even more remarkable, nearly every other female student in this deeply conservative community has returned as well — about 1,300 in all.

"My parents told me to keep coming to school even if I am killed," said

Shamsia, 17, in a moment after class. Shamsia's mother, like nearly all of the adult women in the area, is unable to read or write. "The people who did this to me don't want women to be educated. They want us to be stupid things."

In the five years since the Mirwais School for Girls was built here by the Japanese government, it appeared to have set off something of a social revolution. Even as the Taliban tighten their noose around Kandahar, the girls flock to the school each morning. Many of them walk more than 3km from their mud-brick houses up in the hills.

The girls burst through the school's walled compound, many of them flinging off head-to-toe garments, bounding, cheering and laughing in ways that are inconceivable outside — for girls and women of any age. Mirwais has no regular electricity, no running water, no paved streets. Women are rarely seen, and only then while clad in burqas that make their bodies shapeless and their faces invisible.

And so it was especially chilling on Nov. 12, when three pairs of men on motorcycles began circling the school. One of the teams used a spray bottle, another a squirt gun, another a jar.

They hit 11 girls and four teachers in all; six went to the hospital. Shamsia fared the worst.

The attacks appeared to be the work of the Taliban, the fundamentalist movement that is battling the government and the American-led coalition. Banning girls from school was one of the most notorious symbols of the Taliban's rule before they were ousted from power in November 2001.

Building new schools and ensuring that children — and especially girls — attend has been one of the main objectives of the government and the nations that have contributed to Afghanistan's reconstruction. Some of the students at the Mirwais school are in their late teens and early 20s, attending school for the first time. Yet at the same time, in the guerrilla war that has unfolded across southern and eastern Afghanistan, the Taliban have made schools one of their special targets.

But exactly who was behind the acid attack is a mystery. The Taliban denied any part in it. The police arrested eight men and, shortly after that, the Ministry of Interior released a video showing two men confessing. One of them said he had been paid by an officer

with the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence, the Pakistani intelligence agency, to carry out the attack.

But at a news conference last week, Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, said there was no such Pakistani involvement.

One thing is certain: in the months before the attack, the Taliban had moved into the Mirwais area and the rest of Kandahar's outskirts. As they did, posters began appearing in local mosques.

"Don't Let Your Daughters Go to School," one of them said.

### EMPTY CLASSROOMS

In the days after the attack, the Mirwais School for Girls stood empty; none of the parents would let their daughters venture outside. That is when the headmaster, Mahmood Qadari, got to work.

After four days of staring at empty classrooms, Qadari called a meeting of the parents. Hundreds came to the school — fathers and mothers — and Qadari implored them to let their daughters return. After two weeks, a few returned.

So, Qadari, whose three daughters live abroad, including one in Virginia, enlisted the support of the local government. The governor promised

more police officers, a footbridge across a busy nearby road and, most important, a bus. Qadari called another meeting and told the parents that there was no longer any reason to hold their daughters back.

"I told them, if you don't send your daughters to school, then the enemy wins," Qadari said. "I told them not to give in to darkness. Education is the way to improve our society."

The adults of Mirwais did not need much persuading. Neither the bus nor the police nor the bridge has materialized, but the girls started showing up anyway. Only a couple of dozen girls regularly miss school now; three of them are girls who had been injured in the attack.

"I don't want the girls sitting around and wasting their lives," said Ghulam Sekhi, an uncle of Shamsia and her sister, Atifa, age 14, who was also burned.

For all the uncertainty outside its walls, the Mirwais school brims with life. Its 40 classrooms are so full that classes are held in four tents, donated by UNICEF, in the courtyard. The Afghan Ministry of Education is building a permanent building as well.

The past several days at the school

have been given over to examinations. In one classroom, a geography class, a teacher posed a series of questions while her students listened and wrote their answers on paper.

"What is the capital of Brazil?" the teacher, named Arja, asked, walking back and forth.

"Now, what are its major cities?" "By how many times is America larger than Afghanistan?"

At a desk in the front row, Shamsia, the girl with the burned face, pondered the questions while cupping a hand over her largest scar. She squinted down at the paper, rubbed her eyes, wrote something down.

Doctors have told Shamsia that her face may need plastic surgery if there is to be any chance of the scars disappearing. It is a distant dream: Shamsia's village does not even have regular electricity, and her father is disabled.

After class, Shamsia blended in with the other girls, standing around, laughing and joking. She seemed unself-conscious about her disfigurement, until she began to recount her ordeal.

"The people who did this," she said, "do not feel the pain of others."

## 'New York Times' struggles to stay afloat

As problems beset the most prestigious newspaper in the US, many are predicting its imminent demise

BY PAUL HARRIS  
THE GUARDIAN, NEW YORK



It was meant to be a new beginning for a venerable newspaper. The New York Times building, soaring 57 stories above Manhattan's 42nd Street, was heralded as the most significant addition to the city's skyline for a decade.

When it opened in 2007 it was an ambitious statement of intent for the most famous journalistic brand in America. It would be a sleek and stylish new home for the best journalism in the world.

That was then. Now the "Gray Lady," whose masthead bears the famed motto "All the news that's fit to print," could be staring into a financial abyss.

The US newspaper industry is in a disastrous state. Last year was a watershed: jobs were shed in their thousands, newsrooms slashed costs and even some of the most illustrious names in the business — such as the company that owns the *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune* — went bankrupt. On Friday it was announced that the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* will be closed or go digital-only if no buyer for the 145-year-old title is found within 60 days.

Now, as the industry gears up for an even worse year, could its most renowned title be the next to fall?

Saddled with debts, crippled by the costs of the new building and of running one of the most expensive news operations on earth, some believe the *Times* is running on empty. It is facing all the same problems that other American newspapers are struggling with, as the Internet steals subscribers and advertising dries up in the face of a deep recession. In a sign of the desperate financial straits in which the industry finds itself, the

A view of the New York Times Building. Last month the company announced that it was selling off office space and borrowing up to US\$255 million against the value of the building due to financial difficulties.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

*Times* broke one of its oldest rules last Monday and put an advert on its hitherto sacrosanct front page. But the move only added to speculation about the future of the *Times*.

Some New York media commentators are beginning to contemplate the previously unthinkable: could the *New York Times* go under? Certainly Michael Wolff, a media writer at *Vanity Fair*, thinks so. "There is no point of optimism here. There is no way that this situation gets better for them," he said.

It is hard to overstate the place that the *New York Times* holds in American journalism. It is worshipped by media professionals as the home of true, old-fashioned reporting. Many look enviously at its lavishly funded foreign operations, its arts coverage and its investigations unit. Liberal America regards the paper as a bible, while conservatives love to hate it. But no one ignores the *New York Times*, least of all the people in power. Like the BBC's Today program in Britain, it is vital in shaping the news agenda of America each morning. "Losing the *Times* would be a blow to more than just American journalism; it would be a point out that, if the worst comes to the worst, it would be sold. The Sulzbergers play the part of benevolent owners, keeping the paper's journalism pure as a sort of political mission. But the large Sulzberger clan also relies on the *Times* company's dividend as income and might be tempted to get out while they can. Possible buyers mooted include billionaire New York mayor Michael Bloomberg, Internet giant Google and even deadly rival Rupert Murdoch. *Times* insiders, however, say the family has no intention of selling up. "The only way our ownership structure can be changed is if the Ochs-Sulzberger family decides to do so. They have said publicly that they do not wish to do so," Mathis said.

But, whatever the ultimate loyalties of

Catherine Mathis, pointed out the debt was a revolving credit agreement. "We have been talking with lenders and, based on our conversations with them, we expect to get the financing to meet our obligations when they come due," she said.

Others speculate that the *Times* — which is owned by the aristocratic Ochs-Sulzberger family, headed by publisher Arthur Sulzberger — will have to sell off other assets. It owns the *Boston Globe* and a stake in the *Boston Red Sox* baseball team. Either or both could be sold to raise some ready cash. But critics say such moves would be short-term and only signal the depth of the crisis, not the cure for it. "Let's face it; they would be distress sales," said Wolff.

Many believe that the idea of the *Times* collapsing is still fantastical. They point out that, if the worst comes to the worst, it would be sold. The Sulzbergers play the part of benevolent owners, keeping the paper's journalism pure as a sort of political mission. But the large Sulzberger clan also relies on the *Times* company's dividend as income and might be tempted to get out while they can. Possible buyers mooted include billionaire New York mayor Michael Bloomberg, Internet giant Google and even deadly rival Rupert Murdoch. *Times* insiders, however, say the family has no intention of selling up. "The only way our ownership structure can be changed is if the Ochs-Sulzberger family decides to do so. They have said publicly that they do not wish to do so," Mathis said.

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the Sulzbergers, the *Times* faces industry-wide changes that could swamp the best of intentions. Like other newspapers, the *Times* is facing the structural changes wreaked by the Internet, where readers from Manhattan to Mumbai to Mongolia can read the newspaper free online. Like other papers, the *Times* has developed a huge Web presence that has generated millions of readers. But the cost of the journalism that appears is still borne by the print edition, which is struggling. Put simply: the business model of the *Times* — like every other newspaper — is rapidly ceasing to work.

In the *Atlantic*, Hirschorn suggested the future of the paper lay as a Web site, but with perhaps 80 percent staffing cuts as the group seeks to become viable online only. But would a *Times* with only 20 percent of the staff still be producing valuable journalism?

"The best journalists will survive and eventually thrive," Hirschorn wrote, perhaps optimistically. Others balk at such a vision, especially those at the *Times*. "The *New York Times* is in a better position than many others," said Mathis. Yet that is a relative statement. The whole American newspaper industry is now very sick. Whether the *New York Times* is first to go or last to go, the damage to American public life is already looming large.

"The weakening of civil life is already taking place. No one is repeating the maxim: read your local newspaper, it's your civic duty," said Rick Edmonds, a media business analyst at the Poynter Institute in Florida. But while the shape of the future for the *Times* and other newspapers is unknown, the problems are clear. Take Jack Lule, the journalism professor. He used to pay a subscription for the *Times* and have it delivered to his home. Now he reads it free online. Just like people in Bogota, Berlin or Birmingham. "I guess I'm part of the problem," he said.