**Afghan Police: Children Kidnapped To Be Suicide Bombers For Taliban**

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Afghan police have arrested members of a human trafficking ring they say kidnapped 25 children and tried to smuggle them into Pakistan, where they were to be trained as suicide bombers for the Afghan Taliban.

At least one of the children who was to be trained as a suicide bomber was 4, a regional governor said, and they may have been drugged as well.

Police arrested four alleged traffickers transporting the children in two vans during a security operation in the southeastern province of Ghazni, near the border with Pakistan, on July 9.

Their final destination was the southwestern Pakistani city of Quetta, where the leadership of the Afghan Taliban is believed to be based, officials said.

The incident came as human rights organizations have warned that the Taliban have been recruiting, training, and deploying children for military operations including suicide bombing missions and the planting of improvised explosive devices.

Ghazni Governor Abdul Karim Mateen said the children were aged between 4 and 14. He said they were currently housed in an orphanage in the provincial capital, and they appeared to have been given drugs or some other substances by their abductors.

“The children have received medical checkups and treatment,” Mateen told RFE/RL “They were given substances [by the traffickers] that has made them dizzy and confused. They have lost their senses.”

Mateen said he believed the children were all Ghazni residents, although he said police were still trying to locate their families and relatives.

Mateen said the four people were in police custody and will be prosecuted. He gave no further information.

Fahim Amerkhail, the spokesman for Ghazni’s police chief, said the children were being taken to Quetta to perform “terrorist activities.”

The children had been drugged and were found in a “bad physical and psychological state,” Amerkhail said. He said many of them were orphans.

The security operation that rescued the children on July 9 occurred in the Qarabagh and Ab Band districts of Ghazni, which is largely controlled by the Taliban.

The Taliban have been accused of recruiting and using children as fighters since the 1990s.

In a February 2016 report, Human Rights Watch said the Taliban were expanding their recruitment of children, particularly in the country’s north where the militants have succeeded in expanding their power.

The rights group said in the northern Kunduz Province, the Taliban were using religious schools known as madrasahs to recruit children, often against their parents’ wishes. In the Kunduz cases that the group investigated, the children were lured into the schools and then unable to leave.

Patricia Gossman, a senior researcher on Afghanistan at Human Rights Watch, said the organization has not come across any cases of kidnapping children with the aim of making them suicide bombers. But she slammed the Taliban for targeting children in general.

“The Taliban’s strategy to recruit children as fighters is as cruel as it is unlawful,” she said. “Afghan children should never be used as cannon fodder by any armed force.”