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TOP NEWS

Afghan Women Hope Computer Will Bring New Dawn

Tue April 8, 2003 08:03 AM ET
By David Brunnstrom KABUL, Afghanistan (Reuters) - The screensaver on 18-year-old Nabila Akbari's desktop computer shows a spectacular sunrise, and with just a few clicks on the mouse she replaces it with bright spring tulips.

The Kabul University student hopes she is part of a new beginning in war-ravaged Afghanistan, where less than two years ago a young woman like her would hardly have been let out of her house, let alone into a classroom to study information technology.

On Tuesday, Nabila became one of the first 17 Afghans trained in their own country to earn industry standard certificates in computer networking skills and part of what her government hoped would be a growing talent pool of badly needed information technology specialists.

More than two decades of war have meant Afghanistan was largely bypassed by the IT and Internet revolution.

A U.N.-supervised program largely funded by computer giant Cisco Systems aims to create a core of specialists to take the country into the digital age.

It is also seen as a means to boost opportunities for women in what remains, despite the demise of the Taliban, a heavily male dominated society.

Of the 17 students who received certificates from the university's Cisco Academy on Tuesday, six were women. It aims to train 200 students to

Nabila was one of the star pupils in the first class. "My personal goal is knowledge with other Afghans, especially Afghan women," she said.

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"MEN SHOULD ALLOW WOMEN TO LEARN"

Another graduate, Rita Dorani, aged 23, echoed her thoughts.

"My message for all Afghan women is to try as much as possible to learn computers, because it is essential for every man and woman to be aware of technology. Men should allow women to learn this technology."

 SLIDESHOWS



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Under the fundamentalist Taliban regime, which was ousted in late 2001, women were banned from all forms of education and forbidden to venture outside their homes without coverall burqa garments.

Such official restrictions have been relaxed under the Western-backed President Hamid Karzai, but women's rights are still significantly curtailed in the provinces, in what remains a conservative Islamic state.

Marc Lepage, project director of the United Nations Development Programme, said there were plans to extend it into the provinces, starting with Herat, the southern part of the country, where the conservative government has reimposed some women's rights in the past year.

UNDP's Deputy Director for Afghanistan Knut Ostby said that while Afghanistan has been decades behind in information technology, it now had a chance to catch up.

"Afghanistan has been shut out of world developments over several decades. This has been a problem, but today it is giving Afghanistan some tremendous opportunities in terms of skipping a number of intermediate steps and going straight to the state of the art technology of today.

"The class that is graduating today is part of the force that will help Afghanistan go straight into the 21st century."

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