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- **Source:**  
HRW - Human Rights Watch
- **Title:**  
Senegal: Urgent Action Needed on Forced Child Begging
- **Publication date:**  
March 2014
- **ecoi.net summary:** Report on young boys' abuse and exploitation for forced begging in Koranic boarding schools (physical abuse and exploitation of children; legal framework; state mechanisms for children's protection) [ID 272044]
- **Countries:**  
Senegal
- **Original link** <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/19/senegal-urgent-action-needed-forced-child-begging>

**Recommended citation:**

HRW - Human Rights Watch: Senegal: Urgent Action Needed on Forced Child Begging, March 2014 (available at ecoi.net)  
[http://www.ecoi.net/local\\_link/272044/387499\\_en.html](http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/272044/387499_en.html) (accessed 28 April 2014)



## Senegal: Urgent Action Needed on Forced Child Begging

(Dakar) – Senegal has made inadequate progress in protecting thousands of young boys in Quranic boarding schools from exploitation and often extreme physical abuse at the hands of their teachers, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today. The National Assembly should make it a priority to pass draft legislation aimed at improving living conditions and ending forced begging in these schools, and the government should swiftly enforce it.

The 43-page report, “Exploitation in the Name of Education: Uneven Progress in Ending Forced Child Begging in Senegal,” examines Senegal’s mixed record in addressing the problem in the year since a fire ripped through a Quranic boarding school in Dakar housed in a makeshift shack, killing eight boys. After the fire, President Macky Sall pledged to take immediate action to close schools where boys live in unsafe conditions or are exploited by teachers, who force them to beg and inflict severe punishment when the boys fail to return a set quota of money. While important legislation has advanced, authorities have taken little concrete action to end this abuse.

“After years of governments paying lip service to the need to regulate Quranic schools, President Sall’s government has drafted a law that would finally introduce minimum health, safety, and educational standards,” said Matt Wells, West Africa researcher. “The authorities should waste no time in passing the law and making sure it’s applied. Each day of inaction means that children suffer in abusive environments.”

Thousands of Quranic teachers across Senegal take great care of boys whom families have entrusted to them to learn the Quran and obtain a moral education. But the complete lack of regulation has allowed others to open Quranic boarding schools in abandoned buildings or dilapidated hovels that pose a threat to children’s health, safety, and development. As was the case in the school where the boys died in the fire, the abusive teachers generally live elsewhere.

This report is based on extensive interviews in October 2013 and January 2014 with Senegalese civil society activists, government officials, Quranic teachers, religious authorities, and current and former students in Quranic boarding schools. It follows the April 2010 Human Rights Watch report, “Off the Backs of the Children: Forced Child Begging and Other Abuses against Talibés in Senegal,” which documented in detail how many men had twisted the country’s long tradition of religious education into a system of exploitation built on forcing young boys to beg.

Many boys Human Rights Watch interviewed said they were physically abused when they were unable to bring back the daily begging quota their teacher imposed. The abuse at times rises to the level of torture, including brutal beatings with whips, electrical cord, or ropes; being chained and forced into stress positions for long periods; and being burned with caustic substances.

In the town of Saint Louis, Human Rights Watch visited two Quranic schools, inhabited by boys as young as 7, that sit within ten meters of a garbage dump littered with animal carcasses, car parts, and burned refuse. In the Dakar suburb of Guédiawaye, at least 150 young boys, some no older than 6, sleep in an abandoned concrete structure with no door or windows, no electricity or water – except for pools of rainwater – hundreds of mosquitoes, and no toilet except for the dirt floor on which they stand to bathe. As is often the case in Dakar, the boys must each bring the teacher, who lives elsewhere, 500 CFA francs (US\$1) a day from begging.

Similar schools exist in other urban areas throughout the country. Many are woefully overcrowded, with 20 or more boys sharing the floor of a small room at night, or choosing instead to brave the elements outside. Diseases are common, from skin infections to malaria, and those in charge of the schools are often negligent about obtaining treatment.

The draft law and implementing decrees to introduce regulation and oversight – which government officials said will soon be presented to the National Assembly – would be an important step forward. However, the country has only two full-time inspectors for Quranic schools, which is woefully insufficient for the thousands of such schools across the country. An official in the inspectorate said in January 2014, “If we’re going to inspect or even oversee inspections across Senegal, we need more personnel, we need more equipment.”

“Senegal has long had good laws on the books to address forced child begging, but government will to enforce them has been consistently lacking,” Wells said. “Once the draft law is passed, authorities will need to show the determination to not only support good Quranic teachers, but also to remove boys from the many schools that severely undermine their well-being.”

In the hundreds of schools where exploitation trumps education, boys sent out to beg must bring back a set quota of money, uncooked rice, and sugar each day. The money goes into the teacher’s pocket and the teacher bags and sells the rice and sugar, generating even greater profits off the boys’ labor, or uses the food for his own family. Many of these men amass earnings that far exceed what a midlevel government official makes, much less the average Senegalese wage earner. Boys in such schools must beg for their own meals, in addition to their daily quotas.

An 8-year-old boy in Saint Louis told Human Rights Watch, “I work and sweat until I have the quota.... Sometimes I go back out [to the streets] after 5 p.m. to look for my quota.... If I have it, [the Quranic teacher] won’t beat me. But if I don’t have it, he will beat me.”

As a result of the abuse, many boys choose to sleep on the streets when they are unable to meet the quota. Accompanying an activist in Saint Louis one January night, Human Rights Watch came across a 6-year-old boy sleeping near the bus station at about 2 a.m. He was curled up in a ball with his t-shirt draped over him as his only defense from the winter cold. He said he was short 100 CFA francs (\$0.20) and scared to return to the school because he would face a beating.

In 2005, Senegal passed a law that criminalized trafficking and profiting off of forcing another person to beg. Yet the law has rarely been enforced. In the year since the fire, Human Rights Watch is aware of only one prosecution specifically for forcing children to beg, despite the thousands of children who beg on the streets every day, often in plain view of police officers.

Dozens of other boys have run away from their schools and are in contact with government social workers while living in shelters. Despite their accounts of often extreme exploitation and physical abuse, the social workers rarely inform prosecutors or investigative judges, perpetuating the impunity for those who oversee such schools.

However, there are encouraging signs. The Ministry of Justice’s anti-trafficking unit is spearheading training for judicial authorities on how to identify and build cases of trafficking and forced child begging. The unit is also overseeing an exhaustive mapping of Quranic schools in the Dakar region, identifying schools where children’s rights are respected, as well as those that are rife with abuse and inhuman conditions. It plans to extend the mapping nationwide and use it to help government officials coordinate a more effective response.

The anti-trafficking unit’s head, Judge El Hadji Malick Sow, told Human Rights Watch in January, “We’re working so that [the law’s enforcement] develops further, becomes more common, so that the police have the means to go on the ground and work with children who are victims, identify the so-called teachers who send them on the street.... We need the Ministries of Justice, Interior, and Defense to work together so that the law is applied rigorously.”

Many of Senegal’s religious leaders, including Quranic teachers, have joined Senegalese activists in denouncing the abuse in certain Quranic schools. High-level religious authorities in Touba told Human Rights Watch that to even call these places of exploitation “schools,” or those leading them “teachers,” was an insult to the real sites of religious learning.

“President Sall’s government has many allies in waiting among religious authorities and the broader population,” Wells said. “He should swiftly seize the opportunity to put an end to the system of exploitation that threatens to leave thousands of kids with an education only in how to survive on the streets.”

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