KABUL: The blast walls that cut through Kabul like ramparts are being pulled down, part of a counter-intuitive makeover by local officials who argue the move will give the city's war-weary residents a psychological boost. The government in early July began removing the maze of concrete barriers that have proliferated across the Afghan capital in the 16 years since the US invaded Afghanistan at the height of the Taliban's power.

The bid to remove the walls is illogical to some, coming as it does after attacks in Kabul have surged in recent years, making it one of the deadliest cities in the world. But it is civilians who are driving the push—is civilians who are driving the push—mustafa Sharify, the head of Beeroj Logistics Services, a firm that installs the blast walls, told AFP.

Residents say the walls—which block views of once-wide streets and much loved landmarks—do not make them feel safe. In fact, they represent a threat. “It doesn’t help security in the streets. It helps only for their house,” said Kabul resident Yama Rayeen, gesturing towards one of the tall concrete barriers, which range in height from three to seven meters. “If you block the roads it creates a lot of problems: the more you create traffic congestion, the more you have people trapped in case of an explosion."

‘Getting rid of the cages’

Such traffic congestion presents an opportunity for the Taliban and other militant groups, who have targeted Kabul’s roads with devastating regularity. In late May, a truck bomb exploded during morning rush hour inside the city’s diplomatic quarter, killing more than 150 people and injuring hundreds, in the most deadly attack to hit the country since 2001. While on Monday yet another bomb tore through early commuters, killing at least 26 people when it struck a bus full of government employees on their way to work.

The government plans to remove the blast walls that have been put up by private citizens—many without permission—but those outside embassies and government buildings, high-value targets for the Taliban insurgency, will remain. Nine hundred walls have so far been removed, and officials say the process has gone smoothly. Each section of wall weighs more than a tonne and a battalion of tractors, under police protection, have been deployed across the city to remove the walls. "We are very happy to get rid of these cages. We are born free, we don’t accept restrictions," said shopkeeper Gulam Daoud Ghamugusar, as he observed a blast wall being dismantled, a cup of sweet tea in hand. But while the government is tearing down the walls, the deteriorating security situation has prompted NATO to strengthen its own defenses, doubling the row of barriers that surround its Kabul headquarters.

The “green zone” – a restricted area bustling with barbed wire, that ordinary Afghans are barred from entering—is also expanding as the resurgent Taliban has repeatedly shown its ability to strike inside the capital. Since January more than 1,500 civilians have died across the country in attacks, with nearly one in five killed in Kabul, according to figures recently released by the United Nations. “It was a beautiful city,” retired teacher Ahmad Jan told AFP wistfully, nostalgic for the days before blast walls and checkpoints. “You could go from the Ariana Square to the presidential palace without anyone stopping you. I can’t imagine we’ll ever go back to those days." —AFP

SENEGAL CRACKDOWN FAILS TO REMOVE CHILD BEGGARS

DAKAR: Dawn has barely broken as three of Senegal’s estimated 50,000 child beggars dart through the capital’s streets, hoping for a bag of sugar or a few coins to hand over to their teachers. Senegal’s “talibes” children, as young as four sent to Islamic boarding schools by their parents, then forced to earn their keep by begging, are out in force every day in Dakar, despite a government crackdown on the practice.

Child specialists say a spike in numbers at dedicated reception centres left them struggling to house so many children as they sifted through individual cases, but business as usual has resumed in the months since Mouhamed Lo, a medical assistant at the Yakaaru Guneye centre (“Kids’ Hope”) in the local Wolof language, spots the trio wandering the suburb of Guediawaye with begging bowls in hand, and approaches.

“This problem was raised by the government in early July began tearing down the walls, residents a psychological boost. The move will give the city’s war-weary residents a psychological boost. The move will give the city’s war-weary residents a psychological boost. The move will give the city’s war-weary residents a psychological boost. The move will give the city’s war-weary residents a psychological boost.

KABUL: In this photograph taken on July 22, 2017, an Afghan National Army (ANA) soldier walks past blast walls in front of the ruined Darul Aman palace. —AP

‘BORN FREE’: TORN KABUL PULLS DOWN CONCRETE BLAST WALLS

SENEGAL CRACKDOWN FAILS TO REMOVE CHILD BEGGARS

DAKAR: Dawn has barely broken as three of Senegal’s estimated 50,000 child beggars dart through the capital’s streets, hoping for a bag of sugar or a few coins to hand over to their teachers. Senegal’s “talibes” children, as young as four sent to Islamic boarding schools by their parents, then forced to earn their keep by begging, are out in force every day in Dakar, despite a government crackdown on the practice.

Child specialists say a spike in numbers at dedicated reception centres left them struggling to house so many children as they sifted through individual cases, but business as usual has resumed in the months since Mouhamed Lo, a medical assistant at the Yakaaru Guneye centre (“Kids’ Hope”) in the local Wolof language, spots the trio wandering the suburb of Guediawaye with begging bowls in hand, and approaches.

“If they have been here since 6am, just after the first prayer of the day," he said, describing the rhythm of life for many young boys in this majority-Muslim west African nation. "The structure does nothing for these children. I have been doing this job 15 years and nothing has changed," Lo added. Three times a week, Lo joins forces with a social worker to scout out these small groups of boys and warn them of the dangers of begging in a city of few pavements and notoriously terrible drivers.

Their task is immense: 30,000 of these children beg in Dakar alone, and abuses are common. Human Rights Watch has documented two deaths from abuse at the hands of teachers, five sexual abuse cases and 28 cases of beating and imprisonment in Senegal, all recorded since the crackdown began last year.

Religious tradition

Studying in an Islamic boarding school, or “daara”, is a respected decision, especially among rural families. A son is sent away at a young age to learn from a “marabout” or teacher of the Koran. In reality most learn little of the Koran and less of anything else that might give them a head start in life, instead spending long hours begging with the threat of a beating if they fail to bring back enough money.

In July 2016 the government began rounding up the talibes and checking them for disease or signs of mal-treatment at dedicated reception centers like Yakaaru Guneye. The staff struggled to cope with the influx. “It really was tough for us. We have gone over our capacity by taking in more than 150 children," said the centre’s director, Seydina. The state, Seydina believes, put the cart before the horse in taking the children off the streets without providing extra support to treatment centers.

“The state has just cleaned up around the edges," the specialist added. Rights groups have said more than 1,000 children identified by the government as beggars ultimately ended up back at the same boarding schools with the same teachers.

They believe the lack of sanctions against teachers and schools means they are able to act with impunity, and have called on political candidates running in the current legislative elections to do more if elected. A bill drafted in 2013 after a horrific fire that killed nine talibes was really tough for us. We have gone over our capacity by taking in more than 150 children," said the centre’s education specialist Seydina, who only gave his first name. The state, Seydina believes, put the cart before the horse in taking the children off the streets without providing extra support to treatment centers.

The state has just cleaned up around the edges," the specialist added. Rights groups have said more than 1,000 children identified by the government as beggars ultimately ended up back at the same boarding schools with the same teachers.

They believe the lack of sanctions against teachers and schools means they are able to act with impunity, and have called on political candidates running in the current legislative elections to do more if elected. A bill drafted in 2013 after a horrific fire that killed nine talibes was really tough for us. We have gone over our capacity by taking in more than 150 children," said the centre’s education specialist Seydina, who only gave his first name. The state, Seydina believes, put the cart before the horse in taking the children off the streets without providing extra support to treatment centers.

The state has just cleaned up around the edges," the specialist added. Rights groups have said more than 1,000 children identified by the government as beggars ultimately ended up back at the same boarding schools with the same teachers.

They believe the lack of sanctions against teachers and schools means they are able to act with impunity, and have called on political candidates running in the current legislative elections to do more if elected. A bill drafted in 2013 after a horrific fire that killed nine talibes was really tough for us. We have gone over our capacity by taking in more than 150 children," said the centre’s education specialist Seydina, who only gave his first name. The state, Seydina believes, put the cart before the horse in taking the children off the streets without providing extra support to treatment centers.

The state has just cleaned up around the edges," the specialist added. Rights groups have said more than 1,000 children identified by the government as beggars ultimately ended up back at the same boarding schools with the same teachers.

They believe the lack of sanctions against teachers and schools means they are able to act with impunity, and have called on political candidates running in the current legislative elections to do more if elected. A bill drafted in 2013 after a horrific fire that killed nine talibes was really tough for us. We have gone over our capacity by taking in more than 150 children," said the centre’s education specialist Seydina, who only gave his first name. The state, Seydina believes, put the cart before the horse in taking the children off the streets without providing extra support to treatment centers.

The state has just cleaned up around the edges," the specialist added. Rights groups have said more than 1,000 children identified by the government as beggars ultimately ended up back at the same boarding schools with the same teachers.

They believe the lack of sanctions against teachers and schools means they are able to act with impunity, and have called on political candidates running in the current legislative elections to do more if elected. A bill drafted in 2013 after a horrific fire that killed nine talibes was really tough for us. We have gone over our capacity by taking in more than 150 children," said the centre’s education specialist Seydina, who only gave his first name. The state, Seydina believes, put the cart before the horse in taking the children off the streets without providing extra support to treatment centers.

The state has just cleaned up around the edges," the specialist added. Rights groups have said more than 1,000 children identified by the government as beggars ultimately ended up back at the same boarding schools with the same teachers.

They believe the lack of sanctions against teachers and schools means they are able to act with impunity, and have called on political candidates running in the current legislative elections to do more if elected. A bill drafted in 2013 after a horrific fire that killed nine talibes was really tough for us. We have gone over our capacity by taking in more than 150 children," said the centre’s education specialist Seydina, who only gave his first name. The state, Seydina believes, put the cart before the horse in taking the children off the streets without providing extra support to treatment centers.