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Attacks on Education in Afghanistan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2001, Afghanistan's government has made significant progress in expanding access to education and enabling thousands of children to enroll in school. However, these gains are now at risk. The numbers of children who are out of school are once again rising. The ongoing conflict, increasing insecurity, and, specifically, attacks on education are among the main drivers behind this reversal in enrollment. The current year, 2018, has seen attacks on students, teachers, and schools accelerate dramatically, particularly in areas of the country under the control of or contested by non-state armed groups. The use of schools for election-related purposes has also contributed to large numbers of attacks on education.

The Government of Afghanistan has taken some positive steps towards protecting education, particularly by endorsing the Safe Schools Declaration. In the process, it faces extreme challenges. All parties to the conflict must strictly refrain from any attack on education and avoid using schools for either political or military purposes.

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OVERVIEW OF EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Since 2001, Afghanistan’s government, supported by international donors and international agencies, has made expanding access to education—particularly for girls—a priority.¹ These efforts have been successful in many ways, with millions of girls and boys who were previously barred from going to school now being educated.² According to UNICEF, the numbers of children who were out of school continued to decline through 2016 at both the primary and secondary levels.³

Nevertheless, as of 2018, 3.7 million children between the ages of 7 and 17 years remain out of school, and others are at risk of dropping out. Moreover, the numbers of out of school children appear to be rising for the first time since 2002.⁴ At all ages, girls are less likely to be attending school than boys; around 2.2 million of the out of school children are reported to be girls.⁵

The Ministry of Education and international agencies have identified social and cultural attitudes, child marriage, poverty, violence and bullying at and on the way to school, lack of educational infrastructure, overcrowding, chronic teacher shortages, and insecurity, including attacks on education and military use of educational facilities, as some of the key factors preventing children from going to school.⁶

Among these challenges, rising insecurity and attacks on education appear to be having a particularly negative effect on school attendance. Since 2014, non-state armed groups have expanded the areas where they exert control and have carried out numerous attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure.⁷ At present, approximately 40 percent of Afghanistan is either controlled by or contested by non-state armed groups.⁸

The more insecure provinces also have higher rates of children out of school.⁹ According to the World Bank, provinces that saw an increase in conflict-related incidents between 2011-2012 and 2013-2014 also saw declines in primary school attendance, while provinces that saw a decline in conflict-related incidents saw increases in primary school attendance during this same time.¹⁰ The ongoing conflict has drastically reduced the availability of educational facilities. According to UNICEF, approximately 1,000 schools are currently damaged, destroyed occupied by non-state armed groups or Afghan and international forces, or closed because of conflict.¹¹ Even when facilities are available, the risk that children will be injured or killed due to crossfire shooting or explosions, or abducted, means that some families are too frightened to allow their children to go to school.¹² Conflict-related displacement poses additional barriers to education, such as a lack of educational facilities in the areas where displaced families settle.¹³

The ongoing conflict particularly affects girls’ access to education. Greater numbers of girls are out of school in areas of the country that are under the control of non-state armed groups.¹⁴ According to the Ministry of Education, UNICEF, and the think tank Samuel Hall, insecurity dampens parents’ demand for education more markedly for girls than for boys.¹⁵

Education in Afghanistan not only suffers from general insecurity but is often the target of attacks by all parties to the conflict. According to the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, there were at least 500 attacks on schools from 2013 to 2017, and Afghanistan was one of the countries where the military use of educational facilities was most prominently reported.¹⁶ Moreover, attacks on schools, students, and teachers appear to be accelerating in 2018, with 90 incidents verified by the UN during the first half of the year alone.¹⁷ In addition, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported that at least 112 incidents of election-related violence affected schools in 2018.¹⁸ These numbers put 2018 on track to have some of the highest numbers of attacks on education recorded since 2011. World Bank and Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) each recently identified attacks against education as a major reason for school closures and a significant barrier to school attendance.¹⁹

The past ten years have seen several key trends in attacks on education in Afghanistan. First, non-state armed groups have directly targeted schools, students, and teachers for a variety of reasons, including social and economic control, as well as opposition to co-educational or female education. In the last several years, eastern Afghanistan has been particularly affected by these forms of attack, with a significant number of attacks occurring in Nangarhar province, where the “Islamic State” holds significant territory.²⁰ Second, non-state armed groups have deliberately targeted

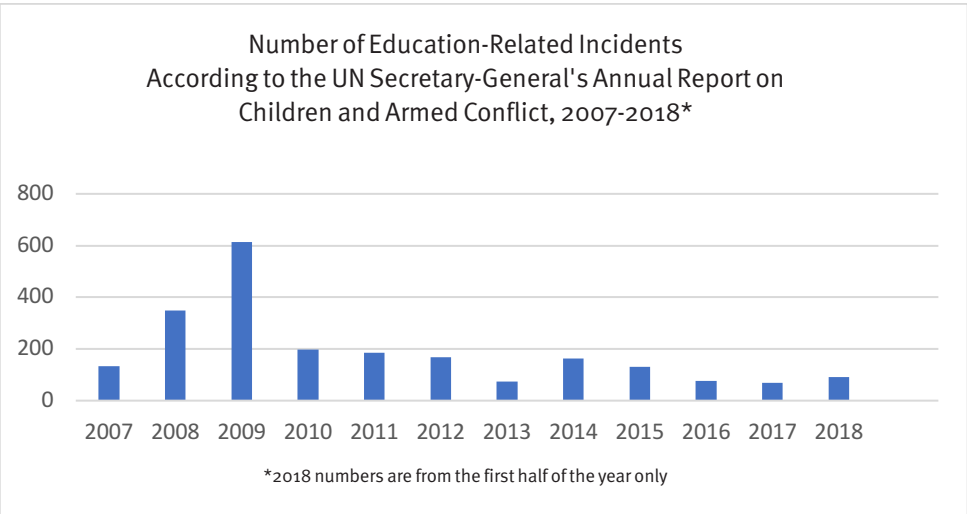
educational facilities used for voter registration or polling centers.²¹ Finally, Afghan National Defence and Security Forces and international military forces have been responsible for damage to schools and school closures because of airstrikes, mortars, crossfire.²² Both Afghan forces and non-state armed groups also used schools for military purposes.²³

Attacks on Schools, Students, Teachers, and Other Education Personnel

Rates of attacks on education have fluctuated over the past decade, with preliminary information indicating a sharp rise in attacks on education in 2018, likely associated with the general decline in stability and with the use of schools as voting registration centers and polling centers during parliamentary elections.

According to the UN Secretary-General’s “Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict,” attacks against schools escalated from 2006 through 2009.²⁴ Around 2009, the Taliban changed its code of conduct, removing a provision authorizing attacks on schools, and, instead, began to play a role in administering educational services in areas of the country under the group’s authority.²⁵ While Taliban governance and attitudes are context dependent, in general, the group now seeks to regulate schools rather than close them.²⁶ It now often plays a role in setting curriculum, distributing Ministry of Education funds, teacher hiring and placement, and monitoring of school performance as well as of student and teacher attendance. When the Taliban is responsible for attacks on education, it is reportedly typically related to the struggle for authority over these educational functions.²⁷

The numbers of attacks on education that were verified from 2010 to 2017 appear to reflect these changes. This is apart from an escalation in attacks on schools that occurred in 2014 linked to the use of schools as polling centers during the 2014 presidential election, as discussed in more detail below.



However, as the Afghan conflict has become more fragmented and new groups, particularly the “Islamic State,” have emerged, recent years have seen an escalation in cases of intimidation and threats against education personnel.²⁸ According to UNAMA, reported cases of threats and intimidation directed at education-related personnel rose 376 percent between 2013 and 2015.²⁹

Moreover, initial reports indicate that attacks on education are accelerating once again in 2018. During the first five months of the year, the Ministry of Education reported 870 attacks on schools, cases of threat or intimidation targeting students, education staff, or education facilities, or fighting in the vicinity of school grounds. These included 86 cases in which schools were directly targeted.³⁰ UN verified numbers of attacks on education are much lower, but still represent a dramatic increase. The country taskforce on monitoring and reporting verified 90 attacks on education during the first half of 2018—a number that is more than double the number of attacks verified during the whole of 2017 (68).³¹

Forms of Attacks on Education

Schools, students, and education personnel have been both deliberately targeted by explosives or arson, as well as collaterally damaged or injured by rockets, mortars, or crossfire. Non-state armed groups, Afghan forces, and international forces have each been responsible for attacks on education.

Armed actors have been responsible for targeted explosive and arson attacks against schools. For example, on September 11, 2018, armed actors carried out a double bombing outside of a girls’ school in Jalalabad city, Nangarhar province. The second bomb exploded as boys from a nearby school and others rushed to the scene. A 12-year old boy was killed and several children were injured. That same morning, another school was targeted in Behsud district, also in Nangarhar province.³² On July 1, 2018, armed men set the Malikyar Hotak school, also in Nangarhar province, on fire after cutting the throats of three school employees.³³ The NRC reported that the “Islamic State” had previously threatened to attack the school.³⁴

Educational facilities have also been damaged by mortars and airstrikes. For example, on January 10, 2016, UNAMA reported that anti-government actors fired rockets in Bak district, Khost province. The rockets landed at a middle school where children were playing, killing at least three students and injuring several other children.³⁵ According to UNAMA, a 9-year-old was killed in the attack, while the Ministry of Education released a statement saying that at least two female students died.³⁶

Attacks on Education in Areas Controlled by Non-State Armed Groups

Reports indicate that a majority attacks on education have been geographically concentrated in areas of the country that are under the control of non-state armed groups, or where those groups are contesting government control. For instance, Human Rights Watch reported an increase in school attacks between April and June 2015, and attributed that rise to non-state armed groups in Kunduz, Ghor, and Nuristan provinces.³⁷ Likewise, UNAMA reported a rise in cases of intimidation directed against students and education personnel in Nangarhar province, where the “Islamic State” was establishing its presence. UNAMA attributed the majority of the cases of intimidation to the “Islamic State.”³⁸

Attacks on education in 2018 appear to be following similar patterns in terms of geographic concentration of attacks on education. From January to October 2018, GCPEA identified 45 attacks on schools, students, teachers, and education staff in media, UN, and NGO reports. Nearly half of these attacks took place in Nangarhar province, where the “Islamic State” controls significant territory.³⁹ These attacks have not only targeted schools, students, and teachers, but also education officials. On July 10, gunmen attacked the education department office in Jalalabad city, Nangarhar province, leading to an assault that lasted for four hours before security forces were able to stop it. Ten people were reportedly killed.⁴⁰

Targeting of Girls’ Education

Non-state armed groups have targeted girls’ education in particular. This is not new; nevertheless, according to GCPEA’s report *Education under Attack 2018*, a growing proportion of attacks on education have targeted girls’ schools, as well as female students and educators, over the past six years.⁴¹

Many of these attacks have explicitly expressed opposition to girls’ education. For example, on January 29, 2015, during an attack on a girls’ high school in Nangarhar province, an armed opposition group left behind a written note that called girls’ schools “brothels” and warned community members to stop educating their girls.⁴² Likewise, on September 4, 2016, a non-state armed group ordered girls’ high schools in three districts of Laghman province to close and asked that community leaders bar girls from attending higher levels of education.⁴³

Similar incidents targeting girls’ education have continued to occur in 2018. For instance, on June 3, 2018, the “Islamic State” issued a statement that they would target girls’ schools in Nangarhar province as retribution for civilian casualties caused by airstrikes by US forces.⁴⁴ UNAMA recorded thirteen incidents, which they attributed to the “Islamic State,” following that threat.⁴⁵

Attacks on Schools Used for Election-Related Purposes

Existing data on attacks on schools in Afghanistan indicates a clear and distinct linkage between schools used for election-related purposes and the extent to which those facilities are targeted. Over the past decade, each election year has seen an uptick in attacks on educational facilities.

- On April 17, 2018, the Taliban claimed responsibility for setting fire to a school used as a voter registration site and abducting two voter registration staff and two police in Chaghcharan district in Ghor province.⁵¹
- On June 6, 2018, a bomb reportedly exploded at a school used as a voter registration center in Pul-e Khumri city, Baghlan province, killing a member of the police and an election commission employee and wounding an Afghan National Army soldier and another police person.⁵²
- On June 15, 2018, one child was killed and four other civilians wounded when a bomb reportedly exploded at the gate of a school being used as a voter registration center in Chaparhar district, Nangarhar province.⁵³
- On October 20, 2018, two IEDs placed on the roof and gate of a school that was serving as a polling center in Mihtarlam city, Laghman province were remotely detonated, injuring two children and 12 men.⁵⁴

Election-related violence also directly targeted students and teachers. In September 2018, the Taliban warned students and teachers not to allow their schools to be used for polling. The Chairman of the Election Commission later stated on national television that dozens of teachers who had been trained to work at the polls did not show up.⁵⁵

According to UNAMA, the attacks on schools and the threat of election-related violence led to significant school closures, and attendance rates sharply declined at schools that stayed opened. Girls’ schools were reportedly disproportionately affected. Damage to some schools was also likely to have longer term consequence for access to education.⁵⁶

Military Use of Schools

Contributing to attacks on education is the military use of schools by both government forces and non-state armed groups. Forces using schools not only often damage the facilities themselves, they can also provoke attacks by the opposing side. According to cases reported in *Education under Attack 2018*, armed forces and non-state armed groups have primarily used schools as bases and firing positions, preventing students from accessing education and damaging school facilities.⁵⁷ For example, police using a school in Baghlan province from April to September 2015, used chairs and desks as firewood, according to UNAMA and UNICEF. Approximately 700 students and 20 teachers were unable to attend or teach their classes during that time.⁵⁸

Positively, these uses appear to be declining.⁵⁹ Since 2015, the UN has verified fewer cases of military use each year. For example, the UN verified 51 cases of military use in 2015, 42 in 2016, and 16 cases in which schools or hospitals were used for military purposes in 2017.⁶⁰ During the first six months of 2018, the UN verified just four cases in which the Afghan National Army (3) or the “Islamic State” (1) used schools for military purposes.⁶¹

In 2015, Afghanistan endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration, a political commitment to protect education that includes a commitment to avoid using schools for military purposes.⁶² In 2016, Afghanistan’s Ministry of Education issued two directives to all security-related ministries emphasizing the government’s endorsement of the Declaration and requesting that armed forces refrain from using schools for military purposes.⁶³

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Insecurity continues to be a significant challenge to expanding access to quality education in Afghanistan. Indeed, nearly one-quarter of respondents interviewed by the NRC in 2018 indicated that they thought that conflict and insecurity were the biggest barriers to education.⁶⁴ Within this context, attacks on education exacerbate an already weak education system in Afghanistan. According to the Ministry of Education, UNICEF, and Samuel Hall, the education system does not currently have the school facilities to serve all school-aged children over the next five to ten years.⁶⁵ The destruction and damaging of schools as well as their military occupation, only serves to limit access to education. Attacks on schools directly serve as an obstacle to children’s education, making it dangerous for both children and teachers to attend school and increasing parents’ fear of sending their children to school.

In endorsing the Safe Schools Declaration and working to limit the military use of educational facilities, the Government of Afghanistan has taken positive steps toward protecting education. But there is still more to be done to implement the commitments within the Declaration, to better safeguard students, teachers, education personnel, and schools, and to ensure the right to education for all.

Specifically, the Government of Afghanistan, non-state armed groups, and international community should:

- *Avoid using schools for purposes other than education*
 - Ensure that schools remain politically neutral spaces, and refrain from using schools as polling centers, which has been proven to result in attacks.
 - Ensure that education staff remain viewed as politically neutral, and refrain from recruiting education staff as election workers.
 - Refrain from using schools and universities for military purposes, including by integrating the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict* into domestic policy, operational frameworks, and training manuals, as far as is possible and appropriate. Ensure that placement of armed security and defence personnel are also not collocated with schools.
 - Refrain from targeting civilian educational institutions as a battlefield tactic and take all feasible precautions when attacking legitimate military targets near schools or universities.
- *Strengthen monitoring and reporting of attacks on education and systematically investigate attacks on education and prosecute perpetrators*
 - Strengthen and support existing monitoring and reporting mechanisms, and report attacks on education and military use of schools and universities to the UN-led MRM, Education in Emergencies Working Group, Afghanistan Protection Cluster (and Child Protection in Emergencies Sub-Cluster), or other monitoring partners, as relevant.
 - Effectively and transparently investigate alleged violations of applicable national and international law, prosecute perpetrators where appropriate, and ensure that cases of attacks on educational facilities, students, and teachers are brought to existing national courts to address such cases.
- *Maintain safe access to education during armed conflict*
 - Ensure that safe education continues during armed conflict by developing early warning systems, contingency plans, comprehensive safety and security plans, and other initiatives to prevent and mitigate the impact of attacks on education at the school and university levels that respond to the specific needs and experiences of males and females and vulnerable groups.
 - Design and develop safe transportation systems that enable children to access their schools safely.
 - Implement the Safe Schools Declaration in a gender-responsive manner, including by considering GCPEA’s guidance, *What Can be Done to Better Protect Women and Girls from Attacks on Education and Military Use of Educational Institutions*.

ENDNOTES

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⁹ Ministry of Education et al., p.32.

¹⁰ World Bank, p. 29.

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¹² Ministry of Education et al., p. 44. NRC, p. 14.

¹³ Ministry of Education et al., pp. 49-50.

¹⁴ Ministry of Education et al., p. 33.

¹⁵ Ministry of Education et al., p. 44. See also World Bank, p. 9.

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