



Protecting education from non-state armed group attacks

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Non-state armed groups are responsible for a significant proportion of attacks that kill and injure students and teachers and damage schools and universities. These attacks also keep students from learning, stunting community and economic development.

In this post, Jerome Marston, senior researcher at the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), marks the International Day to Protect Education from Attack and suggests steps the humanitarian community can take to safeguard education.

ICRC Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog · Protecting education from non-state armed group attacks

While secondary students and their families collected diplomas last October, Al-Shabab detonated *twin car bombs* near the Education Ministry in Mogadishu, Somalia. The attack by this non-state armed group killed at least 121 civilians and wounded hundreds more. “As young Somali people, especially university students, these blasts hurt us a lot,” one university student told a *news outlet*. “Therefore, the universities and schools were closed so that the students [were] able to take part in blood donations and other rescue efforts for the victims.”

This is one example of many. Non-state armed groups were responsible for a slight majority of all reported attacks on education in 2020 and 2021, compared to state forces and incidents without identifiable perpetrators, according to a *new report* from GCPEA. During this two-year period, GCPEA identified approximately 4,500 reports of attacks on education and 570 incidents of military use of schools and universities globally.

Non-state armed groups have long *attacked* schools and universities and used educational facilities for military purposes. In 2020 and 2021 alone, GCPEA identified reports of non-state armed group-perpetrated attacks on education and military use in *at least 25 countries*. The central Sahel region of Africa,

Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Syria, and Yemen were particularly affected.

Some non-state armed groups carry out attacks because they are opposed to the content of the education curricula – that it is *secular* or “*Western*,” for instance. Others are opposed to who is receiving an education – *girls*, for instance. Among other motivations, schools and universities are attacked because they are “soft,” generally undefended – yet high-profile – targets.

On the other hand, some non-state armed groups protect and provide education. As one example, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, in partnership with the United Nations (UN), created an *early learning program* that focused on training teachers and developing an Islamic curriculum for kindergartens in the Bangsamoro region, the Philippines. Many non-state armed groups do both; perpetrating some violence against civilians while also facilitating or providing them with some welfare.

GCPEA found that reported attacks on education increased by 17 percent in 2022 to over 3,000, compared with 2021. Unlike in the previous two years, non-state armed groups carried out a *minority* of all reported attacks on education in 2022; instead, state forces bear responsibility for the majority of attacks that year, according to the UN Secretary-General’s *Children and Armed Conflict* report. Ukraine – where Russian and, to a much lesser extent, Ukrainian forces were responsible for many attacks on schools after the start of the international armed conflict in February 2022 – was covered in the report for the first time and almost certainly explains this reversal. Whether perpetrating the majority or not, non-state armed groups continued to carry out attacks on education in 2022 and 2023 and merit concern.

Why armed groups attack – or don’t attack – schools

Non-state armed groups carry out certain types of attacks on education more frequently than state military forces, and they are more likely to use certain weapons and tactics.

Non-state armed groups use arson, improvised explosive devices, and small arms in their attacks on schools and universities. For instance, in Nigeria, an armed group *attacked an open-air Islamic school* on the outskirts of Maiduguri, Borno state in 2020, reportedly by sending a 12-year-old girl to detonate a person-borne bomb. The attack killed three students, in addition to the girl who detonated the bomb, and injured four others.

Non-state armed groups are commonly responsible for abducting, killing, or threatening teachers and students. Individual teachers are often threatened and targeted in the Central Sahel region, in Colombia, and elsewhere. In one case, in Cameroon, members of a separatist group *abducted a teacher* in Bafia, southwest region in 2020, after he refused to fly a flag representing a self-declared state outside the school where he worked. Meanwhile, high-profile mass abductions have been common in *Nigeria*, for example.

In addition to attacks targeting education, non-state armed groups during both wartime and peace wield indiscriminate violence, which sometimes affects schools and students even if they are not the original target. For example, in Colombia, two non-state armed groups reportedly *engaged in a shootout near a school* in El Bagre municipality, Antioquia department, in February 2023, forcing 1,200 students to stay home for the day.

GCPEA’s report also found that non-state armed groups were responsible for one fourth of reported military use of education facilities in 2020 and 2021. The figures may be lower for these groups than for government forces because non-state armed groups generally lack the military advantage to control large swaths of territory unchallenged. That makes using a school for military purposes risky and may even call the attention of government forces. A case in point: In Iraq, fighters from the Sinjar Resistance Units *used a school as a firing position* in Sinjar district, Nineveh governorate, in May 2022. In response, the Iraqi armed forces shelled the school, killing three fighters.

The International Committee of the Red Cross identified more than 520 *non-state armed groups* “of humanitarian concern,” in 2022. These groups span many regions of the globe and have diverse ideologies, operational structures, and tactics. Nonetheless, GCPEA’s research reveals characteristics that some non-state armed groups share that are worth pointing out, as they may be relevant for curbing attacks on education.

Among other characteristics, a non-state armed group’s *organizational structure* and control over rank-and-file members may determine whether the group uses violence against civilians. A disciplined, hierarchical group may be more likely to curtail opportunistic and indiscriminate violence than one with looser control at the unit level. Also, whether a group has *ties* to a community may influence whether the group uses violence against civilians. If the fighters are connected by family ties and rely on the community for recruits, resources, and other support, community leaders, religious elders, or business elites may have influence over the group’s conduct.

Additional characteristics may affect whether non-state armed groups target schools and universities, and their students and staff. Some separatist groups oppose the language of instruction or view schools and their staff as *agents or symbols of a government* they oppose, so they boycott them and target education facilities, students, and educators. In contrast, others refrain from attacking schools and other civilian objects, either because doing so aligns with their political or religious values, out of *respect for human dignity*, or because they seek legitimacy among *local or international communities*.

Non-state armed groups may also target schools that government forces are using for military purposes, as has happened in *Burkina Faso*, *India*, and *Myanmar*, among other countries.

Steps to safeguard education

Local communities and humanitarian and international organizations are taking steps to protect education from attack. Certain non-state armed groups are making *unilateral statements* to safeguard learning, signing Geneva Call’s *Deeds of Commitment* to protect children from armed conflict and avoid using schools for military purposes, and responding to community negotiations.

For instance, in central Mali, between 2020 and 2022, community leaders negotiated with non-state armed groups to *reopen schools* and, in some cases, for fighters to move their bases further from town and refrain from planting improvised explosive devices nearby. The schools, however, were required to

teach Arabic alongside French and separate girls from boys. The communities also agreed to follow a strict version of Sharia (Islamic law).

A way forward

The International Day to Protect Education from Attack is a reminder to keep at, and expand, work to curb attacks by non-state armed groups.

The humanitarian community should reach out to non-state armed groups where possible to convince them to end attacks on education and avoid using schools and universities for military purposes. Non-state armed groups should be encouraged to use the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict (Guidelines)*, which lay out practical steps to protect educational institutions from military use and ensure the continuity of learning.

State armed forces should also cease attacks on education, and states should endorse and implement the *Safe Schools Declaration*, a political commitment to ensure that all students and educators can learn and teach in safety.

The following are ways humanitarian and international organizations, the UN, and donors can encourage non-state armed groups to safeguard, rather than attack, education:

- Incorporate the *Guidelines* into training and materials when engaging with non-state armed groups.
- Develop training materials on the Safe Schools Declaration and *Guidelines* for local communities and community leaders to use, where assessed as safe to do so, and translate these documents into local languages, permitting better dissemination and awareness raising among affected communities and non-state armed groups. These activities may be especially viable where non-state armed groups are embedded in a local community.
- Encourage non-state armed groups to integrate the protection of schools as civilian objects, found in international humanitarian law, into their training, codes of conduct, and combat practice. This includes the prohibition to attack schools as civilian objects and to limit damage to them under the principles of precaution and proportionality.
- Document and share measures taken by communities, non-state armed groups, states, or international organizations to prevent or mitigate attacks on education by non-state armed groups. Such measures may inspire steps to protect education elsewhere. However, those reaching out to local communities or organizations should assess whether sharing ideas or materials may produce harm and may need to adapt materials and approaches to the particular context.
- Assess whether a non-state armed group is targeting education or instead carrying out violent attacks without regard to whether schools are nearby. If the group is targeting education, the underlying reason will need to be addressed or fighters will need to be convinced of the consequences of legal accountability. Otherwise, it may be possible to remind fighters that education is essential for the community and that conflict should be moved away from schools and universities.
- Encourage non-state armed group leadership to sign and implement the Geneva Call's Deed of Commitment for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict, including as it relates to educational spaces. If a non-state armed group is listed in the UN Secretary-General's *Children and Armed Conflict* report for attacks on schools, either support the non-state armed group as it carries out the activities in the action plan or encourage it to sign an action plan.
- Advocate for and support states to endorse and implement the Safe Schools Declaration and *Guidelines*, since reduced military use of educational facilities is likely to reduce non-state armed group attacks on them.
- Advocate for and support governments to depoliticize education in regions where non-state armed groups are attacking schools, universities, students, or teachers for political reasons.

Using the *Guidelines* as a lodestar, the humanitarian community should come together to safeguard schools and universities, and their students and staff, from attack by non-state armed groups. The International Day is a valuable reminder that more can be done to convince armed groups to avoid attacking education.

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