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2021

EDUCATION UNDER ATTACK IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

A note by the Regional Education in Emergencies
Working Group

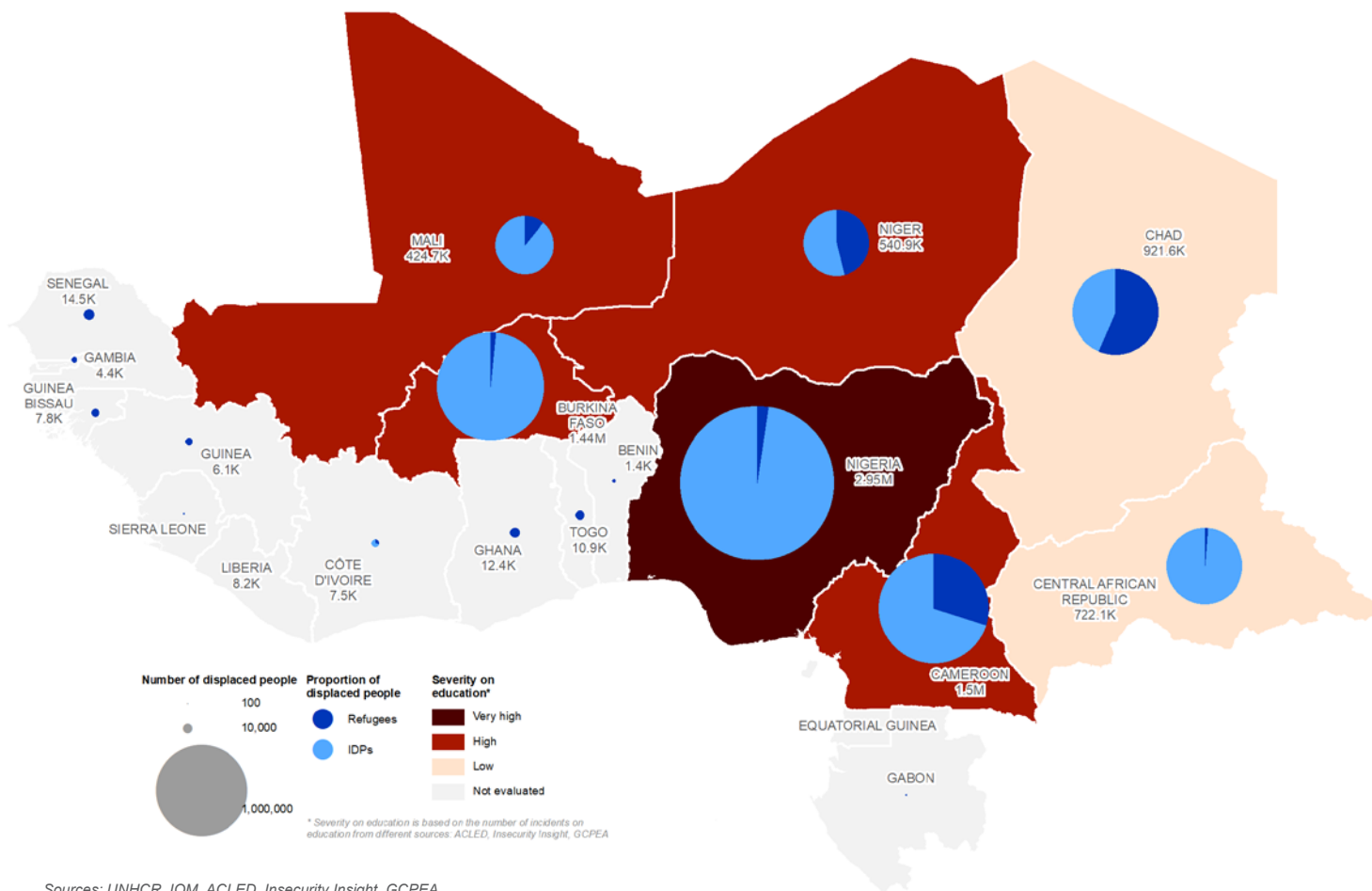
The surge in armed violence across the West and Central Africa region, in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Mali, Niger and Nigeria, is having a devastating impact on children's survival, education, protection and development. On top of the general insecurity and increased violence leading to mass displacements, deliberate attacks and threats on schools and against teachers and students, in school or on their way to school, are becoming more and more common, which further worsens the situation of children and jeopardizes their future.

The Safe Schools Declaration (SSD)¹, which has been endorsed by almost all West and Central African states, provides countries the opportunity to express support for protecting education

1. <https://ssd.protectingeducation.org/>

from attack during times of armed conflict; the importance of the continuation of education; and the implementation of concrete measures to deter the military use of schools. **Gathered in Abuja for the fourth International Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration, world leaders have the opportunity to reflect on what is needed and to commit to key actions to stop attacks on schools, teachers and students, and to protect all children now and for the future generations. The failure to bring about concrete solutions to safeguard children's education means accepting the sacrifice of an entire generation with devastating impact on the socio-economic development of the region and prospects for peace, now and in the years to come.**

Attacks on Education and Displacement Trends in West & Central Africa (as of September 2021)



Sources: UNHCR, IOM, ACLED, Insecurity Insight, GCPEA

ATTACKS ON THE RISE



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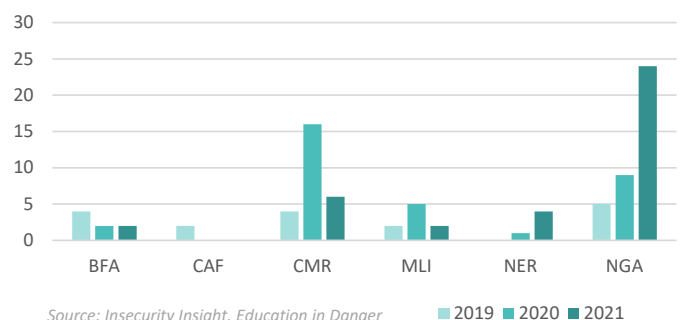
Growing insecurity in the West and Central Africa region has led to an increased number of attacks on schools by non-state armed groups (NSAG) and worrying cases of schools occupied by military forces.

According to data from the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA)², **the number of attacks on schools in the six conflict-affected countries (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Mali, Niger and Nigeria) has almost tripled from 2019 to 2020**, increasing from 303 to 802.

Attacks on schools include intended or actual use of force by armed forces, law enforcement, other

state security entities, and NSAGs, on school infrastructure, including arson, use of improvised explosive devices (IED), airstrikes, ground strikes, raids, and looting. In the region, facilities are looted or torched, teachers are killed, teachers

Number of events where educators were killed, kidnapped or arrested (KKA)



2. Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack: <https://protectingeducation.org/>

and pupils are abducted. There are also many reported cases where armed groups have intimidated students, terrorized parents into keeping their children out of school, and killed, abducted, brutalized, or threatened scores of teachers.

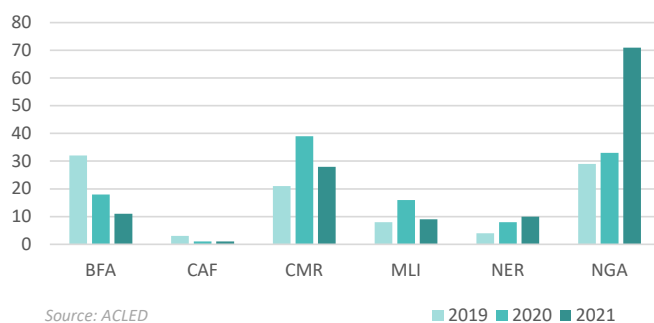
In many areas in West and Central Africa that are witnessing increased hostility towards education it has been reported that schools are seen as a symbol of the State that NSAGs want to bring down, or a spread of Western culture. In the Central Sahel States of **Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger**, in 2019 armed groups started threatening teachers for using the secular state curriculum³. In **Burkina Faso**, several reports demonstrated that the right to education was severely undermined throughout 2020 as a result of attacks by NSAGs against primary and secondary schools; students and teachers were also frequently threatened with violence⁴. In **Cameroon**, in the Northwest and Southwest regions, children and teachers have been threatened, kidnapped, harassed, and killed for going to school⁵. In several countries

3. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/school-closures-sahel-double-last-two-years-due-growing-insecurity-unicef>

4. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/west-and-central-africa/burkina-faso/report-burkina-faso/>; https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/05/BurkinaFaso0520_web.pdf

5. <https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/acaps-thematic-report-cameroon-education-crisis-northwest-and-southwest-regions-19>

Number of events of violence against education



Source: ACLED

of the region, evidence points to a specific targeting of girls' education by armed groups: in some instances, they have clearly stated that they are attacking girls' schools to warn girls not to go to school, demanding that they are closed by parents and teachers, or to try and restrict mobility and dress code for girls⁶.

In **Nigeria**, the reported motives for targeting schools, universities, students, teachers, and other education staff often include the desire to: block the education of girls, abduct children for use as combatants, sex slaves or logistical support in military operations, or abduct students and teachers for ransom and profit. Last April 2021, when armed opposition groups

6. Impact of Attacks on Education: https://protectingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/documents_impact_of_attacks_on_education_nov_2019_lowres_webspreads.pdf





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overran Dikwa, they deliberately sought out formal teachers and students, offering money to community members to identify anyone associated with government schools, and threatening to return and target teachers and students. Beyond this political violence, abduction and kidnappings of students (mostly) and teachers have been on a steady increase in the last few years. At least 1,409 students have been kidnapped from their schools in Nigeria since the first incident in the country's latest student abduction epidemic which started in March 2020. 17 teachers have also been kidnapped alongside their students⁷. Girls who are abducted may be raped and then abandoned or forcibly "married" to one or multiple fighters⁸.

Another striking impact of the surge in armed violence on access to education is **the occupation or use of schools by parties to the conflict**: schools and universities are seized for use as barracks, bases or firing positions. In **Burkina Faso**, human rights reports have documented the alleged use of 10 schools by the Burkinabe armed forces, and the alleged occupation of at least five schools by NSAGs in

the Centre-Nord region in 2019⁹. In the **Central African Republic**, unlike last year, when school non-functionality was largely caused by Covid-19 and insecurity, the occupation of schools by armed men following the December 2020 election period was one of the main barriers to access to education in 2021. According to data from the Education Cluster in October 2021, 689 schools are non-functional (27%), 46 schools have been occupied in 2021 and 5 have not yet been liberated¹⁰. The presence of armed parties, whether a NSAG or a government force, in and around schools, exposes students and teachers to increased risks, including the risk of retaliatory attacks. The military use of schools increases the risk that school buildings and infrastructure will be damaged or destroyed, that teaching and other supplies will be looted, and that both students and teaching staff will be too afraid to go to the school, increasing the likelihood that education will be disrupted. In Boali, in the Central African Republic, the surroundings of the school have been scattered with landmines and other improvised explosive devices, which make it impossible for students to go back to school.

7. School abductions in Nigeria: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/School-abduction-in-Nigeria-1024x655.pdf>

8. Impact of Attacks on Education: https://protectingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/documents_impact_of_attacks_on_education_nov_2019_lowres_webspreads.pdf

9. Their war against Education: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/05/BurkinaFaso0520_web.pdf

10. Central African Republic HNO (Humanitarian Needs Overview) 2022



DESTROYING MORE THAN SCHOOLS



The short-term impact of attacks on education includes death and injury of students and teachers, and destruction of educational infrastructure. In the long term, these attacks and the terror they generated have resulted in a cascade of school closures across the region, but also in disruptions in attendance and declines in student enrolment, further jeopardizing a right to education that has always been limited in Central and West Africa.

At the beginning of 2021, **almost 5,000 schools were closed** in affected areas in **Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger**, the Far North of **Cameroon, Chad's** Lac Province and **Nigeria's** North Eastern regions, depriving hundreds of thousands of

children of education and putting them at risk of exploitation and abuse¹¹. In **Nigeria** only, there was a closure of an estimated 600 schools as of early this year¹². In a country where the number of out-of-school children had dropped from 10.1 million to 6.9 million in 2020¹³, the wave of kidnapping will dramatically affect school enrolment and attendance and jeopardize last years' recorded successes. Confronted with the growing number of kidnappings of students,

11. Sahel Crisis: Humanitarian Needs and Requirements Overview (April 2021): <https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/sahel-crisis-humanitarian-needs-and-requirements-overview-april-2021>

12. Nigeria: Seven years since Chibok, the government fails to protect children: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/04/nigeria-seven-years-since-chibok-the-government-fails-to-protect-children/>

13. Between Abduction and Freedom: <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/between-abduction-and-freedom>

some Nigerian States (such as Zamfara¹⁴ or Kaduna¹⁵) have taken the decision to close all primary and secondary schools to avoid further attacks. In **Cameroon**, 700,000 children have been affected by school closures in the Northwest and Southwest regions as a result of the Anglophone crisis that began in 2016¹⁶.

The closure of schools is not the only reason for **a decrease in attendance and school enrolment**. When schools remain open, **teachers, students and their families are afraid, live in the daily fear of being attacked and kidnapped and are withdrawing or dropping out of schools**¹⁷. For example, in Mali, between 58% and 100%¹⁸, depending on the region, of schools are closed not because they have been specifically attacked but rather due to the fear of attack and reprisals.

More children are out of school today than 10 years ago in West and Central Africa: today 38.8 million children are not in

14. Nigeria kidnappings: Schools in Zamfara shut after mass kidnapping of students by gunmen: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/02/africa/schools-shut-nigeria-zamfara-intl/index.html>

15. Kaduna schools to remain closed until security improves: <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/08/kaduna-schools-to-remain-closed-until-security-improves-govt/>

16. The education ecrosis in the Northwest and Southwest regions: https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20210219_acaps_thematic_report_cameroon_education_crisis_north_west_south_west_regions.pdf

17. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/09/30/au-burkina-faso-les-professeurs-font-leur-rentree-la-peur-au-ventre_6013611_3212.html

18. Mali Education Cluster data - updated monthly

school (compared to 31.6 million 10 years ago), **representing one out of every five out-of-school children worldwide**¹⁹. In 2021, across **the three Central Sahelian countries**, just over half of youth have access to formal secondary education, compared to over 70% for primary education. This percentage drops even further when it comes to access to higher education (19%) and vocational training (21%)²⁰. The trends in school attendance went from 2 out of 3 children in school in January 2021 to 1 out of 2 children in June 2021. In all three countries, collected data show that in 2021, the main obstacles to education (with the lack of financial resources) have been school closure or destruction and insecurity at school²¹. For forcibly displaced children, these figures are even lower: during the 2020-2021 school year, only 60% of refugee children of primary age in the West and Central Africa region were enrolled in school, while only 15% had access to secondary education, and just over 1% to higher education²².

Attacks on schools have exacerbated existing structural challenges to education for all (poverty, poor school infrastructure, low access, insufficient

19. Analysis of education spending in the West and Central Africa region: <https://www.unicef.org/wca/media/7131/file/Reimagining-Financing-for-Education-Policy-Brief.pdf>

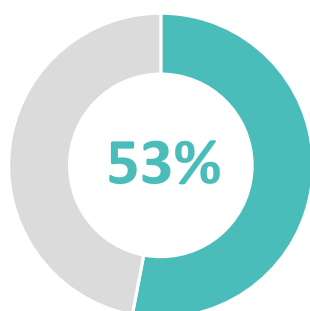
20. Project 21: <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/west-and-central-africa/project-21>

21. Ibid.

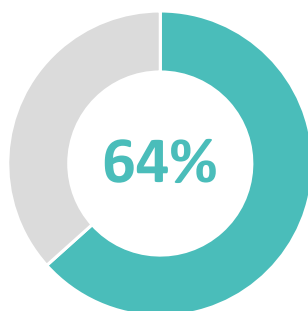
22. UNHCR Education dashboard 2020-2021: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/88010>

A student's wellbeing assessment conducted in 2021 by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in areas affected by conflict in **Burkina Faso, Niger** and **Mali**, demonstrated these psychosocial consequences for children. As psychosocial wellbeing is a significant precursor to learning and is essential for academic achievement, it is extremely concerning to notice that a small percentage of interviewed children declared they can easily concentrate or are "able to do their best in school".

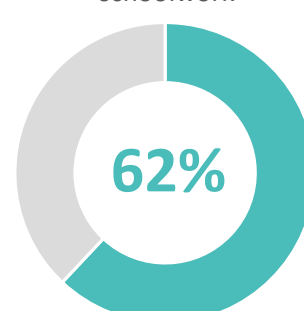
Students who don't feel safe inside the school



Students who have little to no hope in the future



Students who cannot concentrate when doing schoolwork



Interviews were conducted with 641 children (6 to 14 years old) in Barsalogo (Burkina Faso), Maradi and Tillaberi (Niger) and Mopti (Mali)

number of well-trained teachers), and, in some cases, have reversed decades of progress. Disturbances may lead to **diminished quality of education and learning, students falling behind, lower rates of transition to higher education levels, overcrowding and reductions in teacher recruitment**²³. The longer children are out of school, the less likely they are to return. When children are out of school, their learning not only stops but is likely to regress.

In addition to extensive fear potentially leading to school drop-out, **attacks on education can cause long-term psychosocial consequences for children**. In many cases, the assailants commit the abuses directly in front of terrified students, leaving both teachers and children physically or mentally scarred²⁴. The disruption of their basic needs, including attending schools, because of insecurity or displacement, can also deprive children of normal physical, social-emotional, and psychological development. Without appropriate mitigation and response measures, long-term exposure to these high levels of stress can lead to nightmares, flashbacks, and crippling grief, and be particularly damaging to both physical and mental health for children and young people.

23. See for instance, Their war against Education: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/05/BurkinaFaso0520_web.pdf

24. See for instance, Armed Group Attacks on Teachers, Students, and Schools in Burkina Faso: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/05/26/their-war-against-education/armed-group-attacks-teachers-students-and-schools>

Attacks on education have compromised schools' capacity to protect children from social risks. Being out of school or forced to travel longer distances and stay away from home because of the loss of village schools, means that children in these conflict countries are at **greater risk of gender-based violence, child marriage, teenage pregnancy, being forced into child labor or being recruited by armed groups**.

In **Nigeria**, following the shutdown of schools across northern States, there has been a rise in reported cases of child marriages and early pregnancies of school-age girls²⁵. **Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali** already occupy the 1st, 4th and 5th rank of the highest percentage of women who were married or in union by age 15 and by age 18 in West and Central Africa, and among the highest in the world²⁶. With health and safety constraints, girls will be more exposed to the risk of child marriage and teenage pregnancies may increase.

With millions of children out of schools, NSAGs take advantage of this precarious situation, but also of the relative paralysis of the education system, which is an essential protection space for children, to carry out mass recruitment

25. Nigeria: Seven years since Chibok, the government fails to protect children: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/04/nigeria-seven-years-since-chibok-the-government-fails-to-protect-children/>

26. <https://www.unicef.org/wca/media/2596/file/Child%20Marriage%20in%20WCA%20-%20At%20a%20Glance.pdf>





©UNHCR/Alassane Guindo

of many children and young people²⁷. Child recruitment into armed groups in the North West and South West regions of **Cameroon** has taken place in recent years. Once they are recruited, most children in armed groups do not have access to any form of education. Out-of-school children are more vulnerable to recruitment, particularly orphaned and separated children. Children are often recruited with false promises of education, security, and money. Children in armed groups are often abused, exploited, and sometimes killed, and may be forced to take part in or observe atrocities²⁸. Girls who are forcibly recruited are used in military operations in a variety of ways, including in direct combat or as suicide bombers. In Northeastern **Nigeria**, Boko Haram has used women and children as suicide bombers. Experts believe that many of these children had been abducted previously, including from schools²⁹.

Overall, attacks on education will have dramatic long-term consequences for a whole generation of children and whole communities, but also for **countries' socio-economic development**. Access to education is linked to advantageous

27. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/19628/pdf/sahel_armed_groups_final_en_181021_0.pdf

28. The education crisis in the Northwest and Southwest regions: https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20210219_acaps_thematic_report_cameroon_education_crisis_north_west_south_west_regions.pdf

29. Impact of Attacks on Education: https://protectingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/documents_impact_of_attacks_on_education_nov_2019_lowres_webspreads.pdf

economic gains, including higher lifetime earnings and more job prospects³⁰. On the other hand, high levels of teacher absenteeism lead to significant learning and economic losses³¹. Students who experience a significant decline in education are more likely to face lower lifetime productivity and earnings, as well as less job prospects. This could lead to the perpetuation of intergenerational poverty and inequality, especially for children who are already economically vulnerable. Students might fall behind in their learning because of prolonged school closures, leading to inequalities among peers at school and also later in life. This could translate into challenges in productivity and growth for the whole of society³².

For each country of the West and Central Africa region, the cost of the loss of access to education because of the conflict could be incalculable:

we need to make sure that children in areas affected by conflict can return to school safely, have access to health services, have enough to eat and are protected. The implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration represents an important opportunity to address the learning and protection crisis linked to the attacks on education.

30. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/28340/9781464810961.pdf>

31. <https://www.unicef.org/wca/media/7131/file/Reimagining-Financing-for-Education-Policy-Brief.pdf>

32. <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC121071/jrc121071.pdf>

RECOMMENDATIONS



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As of June 2021, more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of West and Central African³³ countries had endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration. These countries committed to take measures to prevent attacks on education and the military use of schools, to collect and report data on attacks, to establish systems to prevent and respond to attacks and to ensure accountability for those responsible for these abuses. As an overarching recommendation, the regional Education in Emergencies Working Group³⁴ calls on all governments of West and Central Africa who have not endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration, to do so. For those who have endorsed it, to

implement it, including by allocating adequate resources to implementation, and to address the specific impact of attacks on education on children by ensuring that they still have access to education in conflict times and areas. The implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration and a strong political will to preserve access to education are the only way not to compromise the chances of children to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to rebuild and develop their countries.

33. https://www.regjeringen.no/en/topics/foreign-affairs/development-cooperation/safeschools_declaration/id2460245/

34. <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/fr/operations/west-and-central-africa/education>

Recommendations to Governments

- Ensure that decision making bodies and inclusive and transparent coordination mechanisms are put in place and functioning in order to operationalize and implement the Safe Schools Declaration; ensure that teachers and students' experiences, opinions and expertise are taken into account. For instance, Mali and Nigeria, among other countries, established national committees to guide officials as they carried out the declaration and to protect schools.
- End military use of schools: ensure the full implementation of the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict³⁵ as a minimum standard and train national defense and security forces on ending the use of educational institutions for military purposes and on the prohibition of sexual violence. For instance, in Mali, in March 2020, the Safe Schools Declaration Technical Committee launched an Action Plan with concrete activities to disseminate these Guidelines, and incorporate protection of schools and universities into national legislation. In 2020, the Nigerian National Human Rights Commission launched a two-day training programme for its staff on Principles of the Safe Schools Declaration to further build their capacity to protect education from attack.
- Ensure that attacks on education are systematically investigated and those responsible prosecuted.
- Reinforce monitoring and reporting of attacks on education (including incidents of sexual violence and specific threats to female students and teachers), with disaggregated data by type of attack on education, sex, age, location, person or group responsible, number of days the school was closed, and type of school to improve efforts to prevent and respond to attacks on education.
- Support the continuation of safe education during armed conflict and restoring access to safe education after attack, and more especially:
 - Ensure that the safety and well-being of children is always put at the center of the decision-making process to reopen schools, taking into consideration health, education and protection aspects, including access to distance and alternative learning opportunities. When schools are closed or inaccessible because of conflicts, engage with different community and religious stakeholders and identify education alternatives that are safer, conflict and culture sensitive;
 - Systematize measures to prevent attacks on education: rehabilitation and securing of damaged or destroyed schools (including through demining), negotiation for the reopening of closed schools and the non-occupation of schools by armed groups, establishment of early warning systems and emergency response plans (in consultation with school communities), capacity building of education personnel, training of children and teachers in self-protection, including through the Safe Schools approach.
- Promote and support teachers' protection and well-being, especially when deployed in hard to reach and conflict affected areas, by recognizing the impact of crises on teachers in their own lives and in their ability to do their work, and by providing them comprehensive support at the individual, school, community, and national levels.

35. Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict: https://protectingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/documents_guidelines_en.pdf

Recommendations to the International Community

- Use the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict as a tool in efforts to convince all parties to the conflict, including NSAGs, to respect the right to education.
- Support enhanced protection measures: expand support for enhanced security measures, including emergency communications systems, especially for rural communities, systematic early warning systems, the development of comprehensive school-based safety and security plans, and programs to provide security training for educators and students.
- Support school security as a component of UN peacekeeping mandate. Ensure that peacekeeping missions have the mandate where relevant and the capacity to monitor, report, and respond to attacks on schools, military use of schools, and abductions and recruitment of students and education personnel.
- Prioritize and fund measures to prevent, mitigate, and respond to attacks on education within humanitarian response and development plans and programs; invest in education during emergencies, to provide protective education to prepare children to transition into longer term learning pathways, and help break the cycle of conflict and build long-term peace.
- Support the creation of safe, protective, and inclusive learning environments, ensuring all children and youth are physically and emotionally safe, free from harm, violence or abuse, including the integration of psychosocial support approaches and the improvement of referral systems to appropriate services.
- Mobilize local champions to support them to demand for accountability and ensure that perpetrators of attacks are brought to justice.



Recommendations to Governments and/or the International Community, when possible, to use the Safe Schools Declaration to push leaders of Non-State Armed Groups to:

- Adopt and implement the related Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.
- Sign and implement Geneva Call's Deed of Commitment for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict³⁶, including as it relates to educational spaces.
- End all attacks on education, including attacks on schools, students, and teachers, and the specific abuses against female students, teachers and other education personnel. For instance, in the Central African Republic, an armed group signed an Action Plan with the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG CAAC) covering a commitment to refrain from attacks on schools³⁷.
- Stop recruitment and use of children under 18 years of age and suspend from their positions, pending investigations, any commanders who are credibly alleged to have recruited and used child soldiers, including the use of girls for any reason.
- Take all steps necessary to prevent sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) by combatants, including by halting all forced and child marriages, and hold combatants accountable, in accordance with international standards.
- Comply with international law: take all measures necessary to ensure that combatants strictly comply with international humanitarian law and the principles of international human rights law, including by issuing command orders, adopting internal policies, or creating a code of conduct that incorporate international humanitarian law obligations regarding the protection of education and the prohibition against sexual violence and recruitment and use of children.

36. https://www.genevacall.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2013/12/DoC-Protecting-children-in-armed-conflict.pdf

37. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/action-plan-to-protect-children-signed-in-the-central-african-republic/>



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