

AFGHANISTAN

The UN reported more than 1,000 attacks on education in 2009-2012, including schools being set on fire, suicide bombings and remotely detonated bombs, killings of staff, threats to staff and abductions. Given the challenges in collecting and verifying reports in Afghanistan, the true number may well be significantly higher.

CONTEXT

During 2009-2012, armed opposition groups, including the Taliban, continued to fight to regain control of the country, which they lost in 2001 to US-backed forces.

NATO assumed responsibility for security in Afghanistan from the US-led coalition in 2006. Following military setbacks, in March 2009, US President Barack Obama announced a new policy of increasing US forces there in the short term, taking the total number of foreign troops to 130,000, while agreeing to hand control of security to Afghan forces by December 2014.

By the end of 2012, the Taliban had a strong influence over areas of the south and east but also maintained pockets of control and the ability to carry out attacks in every region of the country. In 2011, the Afghan government and its international partners began efforts to hold peace negotiations with the Taliban but there was little concrete progress by mid-2013.³⁹⁵

In addition to the Taliban, numerous other armed anti-government groups were active, some affiliated with the Taliban and some pursuing separate agendas. The situation was further complicated by the unpredictable activities of village militias (arbakai) – some allied with or supported by the government of Afghan President Karzai and some operating independently – and the Afghan Local Police, a village-level defence force established by the

Afghan government at the urging of the US to defend communities from attack.³⁹⁶

The Taliban and other groups have for many years attacked schools, teachers and students.³⁹⁷ Along with other forms of insecurity, this violence has impeded access to education and in some areas actually rolled back progress made after schools reopened in 2002. In 2009, for example, more than 70 per cent of schools in Helmand province and more than 80 per cent in Zabul province were closed.³⁹⁸ In May 2012, the Ministry of Education reported that more than 590 schools were closed in areas at risk, mostly in Helmand, Zabul and Kandahar provinces.³⁹⁹

As of 2011,⁴⁰⁰ gross primary enrolment⁴⁰¹ was 97 per cent, gross secondary enrolment was 52 per cent and gross tertiary enrolment was 4 per cent.⁴⁰² Net attendance was only 66 per cent for boys and 40 per cent for girls at primary school level, and 18 per cent for boys and 6 per cent for girls at secondary level (2007-2011).⁴⁰³

ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS

Types of attacks on schools included the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), landmines and suicide bombs in or around school buildings, rocket attacks, grenades thrown into school playgrounds or facilities, the burning down of buildings, looting and forced closure of schools.⁴⁰⁴

The UN reported 613 school-related attacks in January-November 2009, compared with 348 in the whole of 2008, with attacks on schools increasing in areas around Kabul and in the east, including in the provinces of Wardak, Logar, Khost, Laghman, Kunar and Nangarhar.⁴⁰⁵ For instance, unknown armed men used dynamite to blast a high school in Nadir Shakhkot district of Khost province in May 2009, destroying 18 classrooms.⁴⁰⁶ However, the number of incidents dropped to 197 in 2010. There were spikes in the number of attacks in September 2010, at the time of the parliamentary elections, just as there were during the 2009 presidential elections, when schools were used as polling stations.⁴⁰⁷ But the number fell to 167 in 2012. (There were at least 133 attacks on schools or school-related victims in 2011, but the UN report did not clarify how many other of the 185 incidents of attacks on schools and hospitals were attacks on schools.)⁴⁰⁸

Anti-government groups were responsible for the 'vast majority' of attacks in 2012, the UN Mission in

Afghanistan, UNAMA, verified.⁴⁰⁹ However, these groups operated both covertly and publicly, sometimes claiming responsibility for attacks and sometimes denying activities attributed to them by others, making the overall conflict – and efforts to determine the source of attacks – complex. The UN Mission also verified four attacks by armed groups that were not anti-government in 2012 and at least nine by Afghan Local Police,⁴¹⁰ as well as one incident in which American forces ‘bombed’ a school in Nangarhar province, injuring 12 children and a school employee and damaging the school building.⁴¹¹ The UN Secretary-General’s Report on Children and Armed Conflict said that among documented – as opposed to verified⁴¹² – incidents, attacks by anti-government elements outnumbered those by pro-government forces by two to one and approximately one in four attacks were by unidentified perpetrators.⁴¹³ An earlier study reported that criminal gangs have also threatened or attacked schools in Afghanistan.⁴¹⁴

Motives for attacks by armed non-state groups included opposition to the perceived ‘western’ or ‘un-Islamic’ curriculum, external affiliations of the school or the perceived role of Western forces in rebuilding some schools, the education of girls generally, or any operation of the central government.⁴¹⁵ Other attacks were motivated by the wider political objectives of the insurgency in particular areas or the use of schools by opposing forces (see the Military use of schools section of this profile).⁴¹⁶

In 2012, the Taliban made public statements saying it did not oppose education but only curricula that tried to supplant Islamic and national values with western culture. It also denied responsibility for attacks on schools. Nevertheless, the UN reported that attacks and threats of attack continued in areas controlled by anti-government groups, including the Taliban.⁴¹⁷ In some places, the Taliban allowed schools to reopen, sometimes due to public opposition to their continuing closure. In these areas, there is evidence that Taliban officials sought to control the curriculum and the appointment of teachers, and place additional restrictions on girls.⁴¹⁸ They also appointed ‘controllers’ or shadow directors who distributed Taliban directives on schools and pressed local officials to change the curriculum in line with Taliban thinking. In some

cases, they checked if teachers and students were turning up to school.⁴¹⁹

ATTACKS ON SCHOOL STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND OTHER EDUCATION PERSONNEL

In addition to schools being damaged, destroyed or shut down, students, teachers and other education personnel were killed, injured, abducted and driven away from their schools. School students, teachers and other education personnel were killed or injured by the use of IEDs and suicide bombing attacks.⁴²⁰ Grenades were lobbed into schoolyards.⁴²¹ Bombs were hidden in pushcarts and rickshaws, or carried on motorbikes.⁴²² For instance, on 20 October 2010, at least eight children were killed when a powerful roadside bomb blasted a school bus carrying girls in the Khash Rod district of Nimrod province.⁴²³ On 3 July 2011, a suspected militant on a motorbike threw a grenade at the main gate of a school in Faryab province, wounding 17 children, two critically.⁴²⁴ On 3 May 2012, three students and two teachers were injured when an attacker threw a grenade into the playground of Mir Ghulam Mohammad Ghubar High School in Kabul.⁴²⁵

According to UN figures, at least 24 teachers and other education personnel and 23 students were killed and 342 students and 41 teachers and education personnel were injured in attacks on education in 2009.⁴²⁶ In 2010, at least 21 students, teachers or education officials were killed.⁴²⁷ In 2011, 25 education staff members were killed and seven abducted; in one incident, six teachers were killed and one abducted, allegedly by anti-government elements.⁴²⁸ UNAMA recorded six instances of targeted killings of teachers, school guards and department of education officials by anti-government elements during the first six months of 2012 – an increase compared with the first six months of 2011.⁴²⁹ Separately reported, one of the most serious incidents in 2012 involved an ambush in May of a convoy of education officials travelling to visit schools in Paktika province. According to the police and a provincial government spokesperson, the convoy was hit by a remotely detonated roadside bomb and then came under gunfire. Five officials were killed and three others wounded.⁴³⁰

Threats to girl students and their teachers

Attackers frequently targeted girls' education. 'Night letters' – threatening letters placed at night outside schools, en route to the school or outside teachers' homes – were distributed in the southern, south-eastern, central and northern regions, warning entire communities not to send their daughters to school and calling on teachers and government employees to close schools, especially girls' schools. Some letters warned that failure to comply with the demand would lead to retribution, such as acid or gas attacks.⁴³¹ In another example, in 2009, a teacher at a girls' school received a letter with Taliban insignia that forced her to quit her post: 'We warn you to leave your job as a teacher as soon as possible otherwise we will cut the heads off your children and we shall set fire to your daughter...This is your first and last warning.'⁴³² In some cases, the threats were carried out. In May 2011, for instance, the head teacher of Porak girls' school, Logar province, was shot and killed near his home after receiving repeated death threats telling him not to teach girls.⁴³³

Alleged poison attacks

There were numerous allegations of mass school poisonings, either through intentional contamination of drinking water or by the release of gas into the air, including 17 such alleged incidents in the first half of 2012.⁴³⁴ Although no scientific evidence has been found to support these attacks, they have escalated fear and disrupted children's access to education. For example, on 12 May 2009, at Qazaaq school, north of Kabul, five girls reportedly went into comas and almost 100 others were hospitalised, allegedly due to the release of toxic gas.⁴³⁵ Similar attacks were reported at other girls' schools.⁴³⁶ An alleged poison attack in Kunduz city in 2010 caused 1,500 girls to miss classes at Khadeja-tul Kubra high school.⁴³⁷ By mid-2012, hundreds of students and education staff affected by such incidents had been treated by medical officials for symptoms such as nausea and unconsciousness.

In June 2012, Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security announced that it had arrested 15 people, including two schoolgirls, who confessed to involvement in poison attacks in Takhar province.⁴³⁸ However, UNAMA expressed concern that the people arrested had been tortured and that the

publicizing of the confessions compromised the right to a fair trial.⁴³⁹

In July 2012, UNAMA reported 17 alleged poisonings, particularly targeting girls' schools. In all cases it reviewed, however, it found no evidence of 'deliberate acts to harm'. Testing of contaminated water by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the World Health Organization (WHO) and government departments found no evidence of toxic substances, and forensic testing of other potential sources of poison proved inconclusive.⁴⁴⁰ Preliminary WHO investigations of some cases pointed to mass hysteria as the likely cause.⁴⁴¹

MILITARY USE OF SCHOOLS

Schools were also used for military purposes. The UN Secretary-General reported that international military forces used schools on five occasions in 2010,⁴⁴² and that in 2011 schools were taken over 20 times by armed groups and 11 times by pro-government forces, totalling 31 incidents of military use of schools.⁴⁴³ In 2012, 10 schools were used for military purposes, three of them by anti-government elements and seven by pro-government forces.⁴⁴⁴

Although most occupations were temporary, local elders in Kapisa province told UNAMA in 2012 that the Afghan National Army (ANA) had used a school building for the previous four years, forcing staff to teach pupils outside.

There was also evidence that occupation of schools by security forces made the buildings a target for attack. For instance, in May 2012, after police occupied two schools in Badakhshan province, displacing the students and teachers, anti-government elements fired a rocket-propelled grenade into the school compound, damaging the building, and warned local officials that they would continue to target schools used for military purposes. In June, the forces vacated both schools.⁴⁴⁵

ATTACKS ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Several universities were also targeted. For example, a new Islamic university, Jamiyat'al-Uloom'al-Islamiya, in Jalalabad, was badly damaged in a bomb attack on 8 February 2011, following threatening

letters accusing the university and three local seminaries of 'spreading western propaganda and poisoning the minds of the young generation in Afghanistan'.⁴⁴⁶ According to news reports, the threats and bombing caused 120 students to drop out.⁴⁴⁷

The use of suicide bombers extended to at least one university as well as to schools. On 7 February 2012, government officials reported that a blast from a suicide bomb car attack close to the entrance to Kandahar University killed at least seven people and also wounded 23.⁴⁴⁸

In another case, Sunni students attacked Shiite students at Kabul University in late November 2012 to prevent them from observing Ashura – the festival of the martyrdom of Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad – inside a dormitory mosque. Around 100 students were involved in the fighting, university buildings were damaged, one student was killed after being thrown out of a window and up to 30 were wounded.⁴⁴⁹

ATTACKS ON EDUCATION IN 2013

According to the Ministry of Education, approximately 100 teachers and education officials were killed between January and August, some of them by assassination, others in roadside bombings and crossfire.⁴⁵⁰ In June, in one incident with heavy casualties, a suicide bomber on a motorcycle detonated his explosives close to a boys' high school in Chamkani district, at going home time when ISAF and Afghan Local Police forces were passing, killing 10 students and injuring 15 others.⁴⁵¹ The UN said tactics such as suicide bombings close to schools could be war crimes.⁴⁵² In other incidents, UNAMA reported that a student was abducted and killed in May in Bak district, Khost province, after chanting an anti-Taliban song, and an education officer was shot and injured while visiting schools to monitor them in Kunar province in June;⁴⁵³ and in August, a teacher's home in the Sangin district of Helmand province was targeted – an explosive device was set off outside the house of a teacher who had previously received threats to leave his job, killing two children.⁴⁵⁴ Three education administrators were also shot dead in Parwan, Uruzgan and Herat provinces by unknown gunmen in August.⁴⁵⁵ Schools and universities were threatened,⁴⁵⁶ set on fire⁴⁵⁷ or used as bases for combat,⁴⁵⁸ and there were continuing reports of

alleged mass poisonings of schoolgirls,⁴⁵⁹ although there was no verification of whether poisoning took place.

In May, the Taliban forced schools in Zabul province to close after the local government banned motorcycles as a security measure because they were being used in assassinations.⁴⁶⁰

ENDNOTES AFGHANISTAN

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³⁹⁸ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), *Afghanistan Annual Report 2009 on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict* (Kabul, Afghanistan: UNAMA, January 2010), 4.

³⁹⁹ UNAMA and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Afghanistan Mid-Year Report 2012 on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict* (Kabul, Afghanistan: UNAMA and OHCHR, July 2012), 33.

⁴⁰⁰ As stated in the methodology section, the statistical information on enrollment and literacy rates in profiled countries should be treated with caution, especially in the case of those countries that have experienced considerable disruption due to armed conflict, insecurity or instability. Though formally correct, such statistical data may contain outdated information and may not capture with full accuracy the actual educational situation of a country. ⁴⁰¹ The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) indicates the

number of students enrolled in a particular level of education regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population at the official age for a given level. It is therefore often a much higher figure than the Net Enrolment Ratio (NER), which represents the percentage of students enrolled at a particular level who actually belong to the official age group for that level. This study cites NER whenever possible, but for some countries and levels of education, GER is the only available figure and has therefore had to be used instead.

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⁴⁰⁸ UNAMA and OHCHR, *Afghanistan Annual Report 2012 on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict* (Kabul Afghanistan: UNAMA and OHCHR, February 2013), 57; and UNSC, *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, A/67/845-S/2013/245*, 15 May 2013, para 31; UNSC, *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, A/66/782-S/2012/261*, 26 April 2012, para 16.

⁴⁰⁹ UNAMA and OHCHR, *Afghanistan Annual Report 2012 on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict* (Kabul Afghanistan: UNAMA and OHCHR, February 2013), 57.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴¹² ‘Documented’ means reported and put on file; ‘verified’ means independently assessed for reliability, e.g. visits to the location, interviews with victims, cross-checking with other information.

⁴¹³ UNSC, *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, A/67/845-S/2013/245*, 15 May 2013, para 31.

⁴¹⁴ Marit Glad, *Knowledge on Fire: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan - Risks and Measures for Successful Mitigation* (Afghanistan: CARE International, September 2009), 1.

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