

MYANMAR

More than a dozen schools in Myanmar were damaged, and classes were disrupted by arson attacks, aerial bombings, and shelling. Communal, religious, and ethnic conflicts killed dozens of students and teachers. In Rakhine state, military-led operations in Rohingya communities burned hundreds of villages to the ground and killed an unknown number of students and teachers.

Context

Ethnic armed groups continued their decades-long insurgency, particularly in different parts of northern Myanmar. The Myanmar military (the Tatmadaw Kyi or Tatmadaw) targeted ethnic minorities such as the Ta'ang, Kachin, and Shan, who they believed to have ties to armed opposition groups seeking to gain increased autonomy and independence for their communities.¹⁴³¹ In addition, communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims erupted in central and western Myanmar beginning in 2012, killing and injuring hundreds.¹⁴³²

Internal displacement and insecurity caused by the ongoing violence disrupted education for thousands of children. For example, authorities closed approximately 30 schools during fighting between the government and Karen armed groups in southeastern Mon state in September 2014.¹⁴³³ In a 2016 analysis of nationwide data, the Asian Development Bank and UN agencies found that security concerns combined with the long distances required to travel to school may have discouraged all children, especially girls above the age of puberty, from attending school.¹⁴³⁴

In 2016 and 2017, during two military-led operations in Rohingya Muslim minority communities in northern Rakhine state, at least 400 schools in Rakhine state were closed due to fighting.¹⁴³⁵ These operations intensified after August 25, 2017 when a nascent militant group reportedly carried out attacks against approximately 30 security forces outposts.¹⁴³⁶ These operations displaced hundreds of thousands of people, destroyed an unknown number of schools in hundreds of devastated villages, and killed untold numbers of students and teachers.¹⁴³⁷ A series of surveys conducted by Médecins Sans Frontières in November 2017 with Rohingya Muslim refugees in Bangladesh estimated that the violence had killed 8,170 people, including 1,247 children under the age of five.¹⁴³⁸ According to the Human Rights Watch, the campaign had partially or fully destroyed 354 villages by December 2017.¹⁴³⁹ The UN High Commissioner for Refugees stated in February 2018 that more than 688,000 Rohingya people had fled to refugee camps in Bangladesh in the previous months.¹⁴⁴⁰ According to government sources, 27,000 members of Rakhine minority groups were displaced after August 25, 2017, but by November of that year more than 24,000 had returned home.¹⁴⁴¹

According to OHCHR, the military-led operation in Rakhine state at the end of 2016 included actions that very likely amounted to crimes against humanity.¹⁴⁴² In March 2017, the UN mandated a fact-finding mission to investigate human rights violations perpetrated by the Myanmar security forces, in particular those in Rakhine state, including arbitrary detention, torture and inhumane treatment, extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary killing, rape, and other sexual violence, and the destruction of property.¹⁴⁴³ However, the Myanmar government stated in June 2017 that it would not issue visas to the UN investigators, a situation that continued at the time of writing.¹⁴⁴⁴

The number of attacks on schools and universities fluctuated throughout the reporting period, in conjunction with the intensifications of military activity and new laws that caused protests that were sometimes repressed with violence at Myanmar's universities. Reports of military use of schools appeared to remain steady until late 2016, and there was limited data on the extent of military use during military operations in Rakhine state.

Attacks on schools

Mortar fire, shelling, arson, and gunfire by various sides of multiple conflicts were reported to have damaged or destroyed schools in multiple states, particularly in the context of the government's military-led operations in Rakhine state. Throughout the reporting period there was only limited information available on exactly how widespread attacks on schools were. However, anecdotal reports indicated that fighting regularly impacted schools.

After a brief peak in 2013, when Buddhist nationalist armed groups increased attacks in Muslim communities, attacks on schools remained at levels similar to those reported in *Education under Attack 2014*, which lasted through 2015.¹⁴⁴⁵

Attacks increased again in 2016 and 2017 in the context of military-led operations in Rakhine state. Further attacks may be reported for 2017 when more detailed information becomes available.

Communal and religious tensions intensified into conflict in 2012, and media outlets reported a rise in targeted attacks by Buddhist nationalists in 2013. There were anecdotal reports of Buddhist nationalist violence targeting schools in two different areas of Myanmar:

- Media sources reported that on February 17, 2013, approximately 300 Buddhists attacked an Islamic religious school in Thaketa township in the central city of Rangoon (Yangon).¹⁴⁴⁶
- According to media sources, in March, more than 200 Buddhist community members set fire to an Islamic school in Meiktila in the Mandalay region of central Myanmar, allegedly while government security forces watched. The mob, armed with machetes and pipes, killed 32 students and four teachers, clubbing some to death and burning others alive. The media reported that seven people were later imprisoned in connection with the attacks.¹⁴⁴⁷

UN sources reported that fighting between the government security forces and ethnic armed opposition groups in Kachin state also damaged schools during 2013. According to the UN, fighting between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the military during October and November 2013 damaged an unknown number of schools in northern Kachin state.¹⁴⁴⁸ For example, the UN reported that, in November 2013, the national army surrounded a boys' boarding school in Mansi Township in Kachin state, forcing 300 students to flee the school. Their stated reason for doing so was to minimize civilian casualties during the fighting by ensuring that students were not present and therefore could not be caught in the crossfire.¹⁴⁴⁹ It was unclear what happened to those who fled or whether the school was damaged.

In Shan state, unidentified attackers damaged two schools in 2013, according to NGO and media sources:

- According to a local human rights NGO, mortar shells damaged a school in Tangyan, Shan state, in April 2013.¹⁴⁵⁰
- In northern Shan state there was one attack on a school in 2013. In Lashio, unknown attackers burned down an Islamic school in late May 2013.¹⁴⁵¹

In 2014, reports of attacks on schools became more sporadic. Fighting between the national army and ethnic armed opposition groups damaged at least two schools in Shan state, according to a local human rights organization. For example:

- Shelling damaged a government school in the northern village of Wan Na Hee, Shan state in March 2014.¹⁴⁵²
- A high school in Mong Nawng town, Shan state was damaged during a three-day military campaign by the national army during November 2014.¹⁴⁵³

Reports of attacks on schools increased slightly in 2015, to approximately seven, according to information collected from rights groups and media sources. Fighting between the national army and the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) damaged or closed schools in five villages during communal violence in the Kawkaik township, southeastern Karen state, in July 2015.¹⁴⁵⁴ There were also media reports of damage to two schools caught in the crossfire of fighting in 2015. For example, police and the national army destroyed at least one school in Karen state, on the border with Thailand, in June 2015.¹⁴⁵⁵

There was one report of an attack on a school in Kachin state in 2015. In June of that year, media and NGO reports stated that a military mortar shell landed 200 meters from the dormitory and headmaster's house at the Alen Bum Internally Displaced Persons Boarding School in Laiza.¹⁴⁵⁶

Attacks against schools appeared to intensify in 2016, with the most significant violence moving to Rakhine state. The UN found that government security forces burned schools and madrassas in Rakhine as part of its military-led operations in the area beginning in October 2016. The extent of this damage was not clear.¹⁴⁵⁷

The UN also received reports of six attacks on schools in 2016, two of which were verified. It was not clear where in the country these attacks occurred.¹⁴⁵⁸ GCPEA also collected information on two cases of unidentified attackers and collateral damage from fighting that affected access to education in 2016. It was not clear whether these cases overlapped with those reported by the UN. For example:

- According to media sources, on June 23, 2016, unidentified assailants attacked a village in Bago division, causing damage to a local school.¹⁴⁵⁹
- Local media reported that, in August 2016, stray shells from a battle between the national army and the KIA landed in the compound of Namyá Basic Education Middle School in Hpakant, Kachin state. The extent of the damage to the school caused by the explosion was unclear, but at least one student and one teacher were injured.¹⁴⁶⁰

Damage to schools continued in 2017, according to information collected from news reports. Although there was limited information available on the number of schools affected in Rakhine state, GCPEA was able to identify anecdotal reports of such attacks, including the following:

- In September 2017, at least one school was destroyed in an arson attack, reportedly by non-Rohingya villagers or security forces, according to international media.¹⁴⁶¹
- News sources reported that on September 22, 2017, a school in Mee Chaung, a village in Rakhine that had remained mostly peaceful during the violence against the Rohingya in other parts of that state, was reportedly damaged and possibly destroyed by a bomb blast carried out by unknown perpetrators.¹⁴⁶²

In other states, media sources reported sporadic cases of schools caught in the crossfire between government forces and non-state armed groups in 2017. For example:

- On January 11, 2017, fighting between the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and government security forces caused schools and other civilian infrastructure to be closed in Namhsan, Shan state. Unknown perpetrators caused unspecified damage to one local high school.¹⁴⁶³
- On March 11, 2017, shelling damaged Hongyan School in Kokang region, Shan state. No students were injured in the blast, as it occurred on a weekend. However, a volunteer teacher who was in residence at the time was killed.¹⁴⁶⁴
- In August 2017, teachers and students were injured during fighting near Nam Ya Middle School in Moe Nyin District, Kachin state, which also disrupted school services.¹⁴⁶⁵

Military use of schools

Local NGOs, the UN, and media sources reported intermittent incidents of the national army and armed groups using schools as training facilities and for protection during fighting, among other purposes. Military use of schools was documented at rates similar to those reported in *Education under Attack 2014* for most of the 2013-2017 period, but it was more commonly reported during the second half.

The UN reported two cases of military use of schools in 2013, one by government forces and the other by a non-state armed group:

- According to the UN, the national army used a vacated boys' school in Bhamo, Kachin state, during a school vacation in 2013.
- The UN reported that a KIA-affiliated militia used a boys' dormitory at a boarding school as a training facility in Kachin state, also during the school vacation. Responding to UN pressure, the KIA instructed the militia to leave the premises.¹⁴⁶⁶ It was unknown whether students were present in either school at the time.

These incidents continued into 2014, with one incident attributed to government forces and one to a non-state armed group:

- According to a local NGO report, in September 2014 the DKBA used a middle school for cover during conflict with the national army. The DKBA allegedly fired on the military from the school.¹⁴⁶⁷
- A local NGO reported that, between June and July 2014, the national army set up a base in a village school in Kehsi Township, northern Shan state, and prevented students from attending school.¹⁴⁶⁸

Military use was reported more commonly in 2015 and 2016. The UN verified six cases of military use of schools by the national army throughout 2015 and documented two cases in 2016, including one in Rakhine state and one in Kachin

state.¹⁴⁶⁹ In addition, a report by OHCHR indicated that government security forces commonly used schools and mosques as outposts or temporary detention centers in the context of the government crackdown in Rakhine state in the last three months of 2016. For example:

- On an unknown date between October 9 and December 31, 2016, government security forces rounded up 12 elderly people in Rakhine state and beat them, before taking them to a school, where they were confined and beaten repeatedly for an unknown period of time.¹⁴⁷⁰
- OHCHR also reported that, during the same period, women from the region had been detained in schools, where they were raped and otherwise abused.¹⁴⁷¹

As of December 2017, there was only one documented case of military use for the year, which occurred in the context of the government's military-led operations in Rakhine state. According to Amnesty International, military forces slept in one school in August 2017 as they moved through villages.¹⁴⁷² The full scope of the use of schools by the military was unknown at the time of writing.

Sexual violence by armed parties at, or en route to or from, school or university

There were at least two reported cases in which sexual violence affected education between 2013 and 2017, one in the context of communal conflict in Kachin state, and one in the context of violence in Rakhine state. This type of violence was not documented in *Education under Attack 2014*. For example:

- Human Rights Watch reported that, in January 2015, soldiers stationed near a school physically assaulted, raped, and killed two female school teachers in their dormitory in Kuang Kha in Shan state.¹⁴⁷³ According to Human Rights Watch, the military denied all involvement and threatened to take legal action against anyone alleging their involvement.¹⁴⁷⁴
- OHCHR reported that, in the last three months of 2016, women in Rakhine state were detained, raped, and otherwise abused by armed groups in schools.¹⁴⁷⁵ In one such case, a Rohingya woman in a Bangladesh refugee camp reported to Human Rights Watch that before she left her village of Kyein Chaung, in Maungdaw township, a soldier dragged her to a school toilet and raped her there.¹⁴⁷⁶

Attacks on higher education

There were more reports of attacks on higher education during the 2013-2017 reporting period than in the previous period, possibly due to tensions related to the new National Education Law passed in 2014. The law restricted university student unions and teachers' unions and prohibited minority ethnic language education at universities. Its passage sparked a widespread outcry and protests calling for increased academic freedom, which were met with violence by police and other government security forces.¹⁴⁷⁷ The majority of the attacks on higher education for which reports were collected by GCPEA occurred in the following year, 2015.

No attacks on higher education were documented until 2015. Rights groups including Human Rights Watch, Scholars at Risk, and Amnesty International reported that, beginning in March of that year, police responded to student protests over the new National Education Law with excessive use of force and violence, harassment, and detention of some of the students involved. For example:

- In Letpadan, Pegu region, central Myanmar, at least 80 students and their supporters, mostly monks, were reportedly arrested following clashes with police in March. The students were protesting the new education law.¹⁴⁷⁸ Local and international media reported that police beat protesters and the medical responders who were called to assist them.¹⁴⁷⁹ Amnesty International stated that in the following month the police harassed and threatened student leaders and their supporters for their suspected involvement in the protest.¹⁴⁸⁰ According to *Reuters*, the government released at least 14 of the arrested students two days after the protest. As of March 2016, the government reportedly had plans to release the other students, but whether or not this had happened by September 2017 was unclear.¹⁴⁸¹
- Two leaders of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, who had been in hiding since the March protests, were detained from late October through early November 2015, according to Scholars at Risk.¹⁴⁸²

2016 saw the release of many arrested students and no reported attacks. Amnesty International and international media reported that, beginning in April 2016, the government released 69 students from prison following promises of reform from State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, although three of those released continued to face charges.¹⁴⁸³

There was one reported attack on higher education in 2017. Local media reported that on May 8, four student union members were arrested for their participation in a protest against a set of laws that banned mobile phones and required strict timetables on university campuses. The students also were calling on the government to respect students' rights and democracy in general. They were sentenced to four months in jail.¹⁴⁸⁴

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