AFGHANISTAN

Attacks on education accelerated in Afghanistan during the reporting period. In 2018, a dramatic rise in attacks on schools occurred, almost half of which were associated with the use of educational facilities for voter registration and polling; polling-related attacks also occurred throughout the 2019 presidential elections process. Threats and attacks against students and education personnel also increased, particularly in areas of the country controlled by non-state armed groups.

Context
The 2017-2019 reporting period saw increased fighting between the Afghan government, international forces, and non-state armed groups, including the Taliban and the “Islamic State of Khorasan Province” (ISKP) in Afghanistan. In 2019, multiple peace talks between the United States and the Taliban took place in Qatar amidst ongoing fighting, however no peace deal was reached during the reporting period.

Fighting between armed parties, along with targeted attacks by the Taliban and “ISKP”, caused substantial numbers of civilian casualties. In 2019, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) recorded 3,403 civilian deaths and 6,989 civilian injuries – the lowest level of civilian casualties recorded since 2013. However, significant periods of violence occurred during the year; between July and September 2019, UNAMA recorded the highest number of civilian casualties in a single quarter since 2009. Violence particularly impacted young people in 2019, when the UN reported that children comprised 30 percent of all civilian causalities and 78 percent of all casualties from explosive remnants of war (ERW) and landmines.

Rising insecurity appeared to have a negative effect on school attendance. According to Afghanistan’s Ministry of Education, UNICEF, and Samuel Hall, provinces experiencing higher rates of insecurity also had higher rates of out-of-school children. In 2018, the Afghanistan Education in Emergencies Working Group (EiEWG) found that 31 out of 34 provinces in Afghanistan experienced at least one school closure due to insecurity. As of October 2019, the UN reported 722 schools as forcibly closed, which affected access to education for approximately 328,094 children; Kandahar, Helmand, and Ghazni provinces had the highest number of closed or damaged schools, according to the Afghanistan EiEWG.

Girls’ education was particularly affected by the conflict, with greater numbers of girls out of school in areas of the country under the control of non-state armed groups. The UN reported in 2018 that the Ministry of Education (MoE), based on previous years’ surveys, estimated that 3.7 million children were out of school in Afghanistan, with girls estimated to be 60 percent of this figure. Of households surveyed in the 2019 Whole of Afghanistan assessment, approximately 18 percent of households whose girls did not attend schools reported the reason as insecurity at or on the way to or from school, whereas 32 percent reported cultural reasons as the primary obstacle.

Attacks on education accelerated during the reporting period, largely related to the use of schools for election-related purposes, crossfire, intimidation, and threats. Between January and May 2018, 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. UN-verified numbers of attacks on education were lower than MoE-consolidated data, but still represented a dramatic increase. In a 2019 survey, Save the Children found that of schools attacked or used by armed forces or armed groups, 58 percent reported that attacks resulted in school closures and 35 percent reported that attacks on educational facilities forced students to study in damaged schools, outdoor areas, or other temporary spaces.

Attacks on schools
GCPEA collected reports of over 300 attacks on schools between 2017 and 2019, which injured or killed at least 410 students, teachers, or education personnel. Reported attacks on schools escalated during the three-year period, substantially increasing in 2018. Non-state armed groups including “ISKP” were reportedly responsible for violently targeting, and forcing the closure of, schools, particularly girls’ schools, and for the majority of attacks on schools, which often included explosive weapons, arson, crossfire, and threats. Afghan government forces were responsible for a
The UN verified 192 attacks on schools and personnel between January 1, 2018 and December 31, 2018, tripling from 2017 when 68 such attacks were verified; 123 of those attacks were attributed to the Taliban and another 42 to “ISKP”. Between January and December 2018, 1,021 schools were closed, affecting access to education for 203,000 girls and 341,000 boys. According to the UN, the highest numbers of incidents resulting in school closures or damage in 2018 occurred in Faryab (11 percent), Uruzgan (11 percent), and Nangarhar (nine percent) provinces. Many of these attacks occurred in the context of parliamentary elections. From January to November 2018, UNAMA identified at least 112 incidents that occurred on election days in which schools used as polling centers were either directly targeted or collaterally affected by violence in their vicinities; in October 2018 alone, the UN verified 92 polling-related attacks on schools. This violence damaged at least 23 school buildings. According to UNAMA, more than half of the 5,000 polling centers in the 2018 elections were schools.

Threats of attacks on schools used for polling purposes also led to the closure of schools in some instances. For example, on May 2, 2018, armed groups reportedly warned school teachers in Sharana district, Paktika Province, that they would target schools that were used for election purposes. All eight schools in the district reportedly closed in response. GCPEA also identified the following reported cases of attacks on schools related to elections:

- On April 17, 2018, according to UNAMA, 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 officers in Chagcharan district, Ghor province.
- On June 6, 2018, international and local media reported that a bomb allegedly exploded at a school used as a voter registration center in Pul-i 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.
- On October 20, 2018, two improvised explosive devices (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.

In addition to election-related violence, non-state armed groups reportedly targeted schools for tactical and ideological reasons, particularly in areas under their control. In 2018, GCPEA identified 65 non-polling-related attacks on schools reported through media, UN, and NGO reports. Nearly half of these attacks took place in Nangarhar province, where “ISKP” controlled significant territory. The UN also reported school closures arising from armed groups systematically threatening schools, and in particular “ISKP” expressly declaring its intention to attack girls’ schools. Reports collected by GCPEA of attacks on schools by non-state armed groups included:

- On March 18, 2018, a suicide bomber at the Kawsar school in Kabul injured 11 students when one of his hand grenades went off, killing him before he was able to detonate his suicide vest.
- Similarly, on the night of April 11, 2018, armed attackers in Mohammad Agha district, Logar province, reportedly set fire to and destroyed a girls’ high school, after physically assaulting the night watchpersons and locking them in a room. According to the Ministry of Education, the attack affected 981 female students enrolled in the school, and 21 teachers.
- On June 3, 2018, “ISKP” issued a statement that they would target girls’ schools in Nangarhar province as retribution for civilian casualties caused by airstrikes by US and Afghan forces. UNAMA subsequently recorded 13 incidents targeting education, which they attributed to “ISKP,” following that threat. According to a media report, more than 80 girls’ schools were closed following the threat, and exams were postponed.
- On July 1, 2018, unidentified armed attackers in Nangarhar province reportedly set fire to a boys’ school, destroying administrative offices and the school library. The attackers also beheaded three school attendants. Government officials blamed “IS” for the attack. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) reported that “IS” had previously threatened to attack the school.
One of the deadliest attacks on schools reported during the three-year period took place on August 15, 2018, when a suicide bomber detonated his explosives inside a classroom at the Mowud Academy in Kabul. High school students from across the country were at the Academy studying for the national university entrance exam. According to UNAMA, the attack killed 40 students and injured 67 others, both male and female.

On September 11, 2018, armed attackers carried out a double bombing outside 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 Behsood district, also in Nangarhar province.

In at least one case reported in 2018, an airstrike by Afghan government forces struck an educational institution. Human Rights Watch reported that the attack occurred on April 2, 2018, while a graduation ceremony for students was reportedly taking place at a madrassa in Dasht-e-Archi district, Kunduz province. According to Afghanistan’s Ministry of Defense and provincial officials, the airstrike targeted high-ranking Taliban officials. According to UNAMA, at least 36 were killed, of whom 30 were children.

In 2019, reported attacks on schools occurred at a lower rate than in 2018. UNAMA verified 70 incidents of attacks on schools, including six reported attacks on girls’ schools in Farah province. In 2019, GCPEA also collected over 50 reports on schools from media, NGO, and UN sources. In July 2019, explosions from car bombs damaged several schools and harmed over 100 students. Examples of these reported incidents included:

On January 20, 2019, The New York Times and Tolo News reported that unknown actors set fire to the Shaid Banafsha Girls’ School, in Farah province, damaging parts of the building. This impacted approximately 1,000 girls enrolled at the institution. Also, in Farah city and province, on January 30, 2019, one girls’ school was reportedly destroyed by explosives, affecting the education of hundreds of girls. No group took responsibility.

Al Jazeera and AFP reported that on March 29, 2019, an explosion from a suspected mortar attack struck a school in Andar district, in eastern Ghazni province, during fighting between state security forces and the Taliban. This resulted in the death of four students and the injury of at least 15 students and two teachers.

On April 14, 2019, an unknown armed group reportedly detonated an explosive device or devices inside Benafsha Girls High School on the outskirts of Farah city. The school had reportedly been affected by an arson attack in 2018 and had received multiple threats. The school, which served 500 girls, was reported to have sustained significant damage but no fatalities or injuries were reported.

International and local media reported that on April 15, 2019, another girls’ school was targeted on the outskirts of Farah city. Unknown armed assailants reportedly set fire to, and detonated an explosive device within, Amir Shir Ali Khan High School. The school, which served 1,000 girls, was reportedly destroyed, including all school supplies, furniture, and records; however, no fatalities or injuries were recorded.

On July 1, 2019, the UN, Save the Children, and multiple media sources reported that at least 51 school students were injured when a car bomb detonated near a school; at least 40 civilians were also killed in the same attack. Five nearby schools reportedly sustained damages, according to the Ministry of Education, as reported to CNN.

On July 7, 2019, international media outlets reported that a car bomb attack carried out by the Taliban injured 60 students and damaged one private school. The attack, which targeted the National Directorate of Security, located in a densely populated area of Ghazni city and province, killed at least 12 adults and wounded nearly 200.

Presidential elections held on September 28, 2019, resulted in at least 23 polling-related attacks on schools, according to reports collected by GCPEA. The Afghanistan EiEWG reported that over 5,700 schools served as polling centers in the presidential elections, and over 70 percent of schools in Kabul were used for this purpose. In August 2019, the Taliban threatened polling centers ahead of the elections, including 4,600 schools used as polling centers, according to UNAMA. Despite the government’s securing of polling centers and IED defusals, UNAMA documented 12 incidents...
of attacks that damaged school buildings, along with 120 reported incidents of threat, intimidation and harassment, including unexploded IEDs planted at or near polling stations. Examples documented by UNAMA included:

- On September 28, 2019, in Bar Kunar district, Kunar province, the Taliban claimed responsibility for attacks on two polling stations located at Paloso Naw School and Shangar Boys High School; that attack included indirect fire and small arms fire.

- On September 28, 2019, the Taliban launched rockets towards a school used as a polling center in the administrative center of Sia Gird district, Parwan province. Three girls were injured and one was killed when a rocket struck a residence.

- Also on the day of the election, in Fayzabad district, Jawzjan province, the Taliban fired a mortar round of mortar that struck close to the Latifa Shahid Female High School while it was in use as a polling station. The resulting impact damaged its water tank and broke the school’s windows.

**Attacks on students, teachers, and other education personnel**

For the 2017-2019 reporting period, GCPEA collected at least 75 reports of attacks on students, teachers and other education personnel in Afghanistan from UN, NGO, and media sources. Much of UN-verified data did not disaggregate between attacks on schools and attacks on education personnel. Thus, to avoid any duplication, these combined numbers were reported in the previous section. However, some of the individual incidents collected by GCPEA may have been included in UN-verified counts.

In 2017, GCPEA collected information indicating that there were at least 40 attacks on students, teachers, or other education personnel, including abductions and targeted killings. These incidents led to the injury, death, or detention of at least 370 students, teachers, or other education personnel. Non-state armed groups perpetrated the majority of these incidents.

In 2018, GCPEA identified 22 reported incidents of attacks targeting students, teachers, and education personnel, decreasing by half from 2017. Reports indicated that at least 68 were harmed and 135 detained. According to the UN, four attacks targeting education personnel occurred between April 1 and June 30, 2018, and were related to elections. Examples of attacks on education personnel included:

- UNAMA and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that on August 26, 2018, the Taliban threatened school principals in Baraki Barak district, Logar province, ordering female teachers of grades one to 12 and female students from grades seven to 12 to stop attending school. As a result, classes for girls above grade six were suspended and female teachers were replaced.

- On October 23, 2018, UNAMA and OHCHR reported that the Taliban abducted 125 education personnel in Ghazni province. The motive for this attack was that the victims had been paid their salaries via bank accounts, as opposed to manually whereby the Taliban would have profited.

In addition, there was at least one significant attack targeting education officials in Nangarhar province. On July 11, 2018, armed gunmen carried out a four-hour assault on the education department office in Jalalabad city, killing ten people. According to a spokesperson for the education department, teachers were delivering exam results when the attack occurred.

In 2019, GCPEA identified reports of at least 11 attacks on students, teachers, and other education personnel, which injured or killed at least 30 people. One example includes the reported murder of the Director of Education for Marja district, Helmand province, on March 13, 2019. The New York Times reported that he and his brother were allegedly killed after attending a meeting in which the Taliban had participated.

Attacks also affected children on the way to or from school. For example, local and international media, including Al Jazeera, reported that on November 2, 2019, a roadside bomb exploded in Darqad district, Takhar province, killing nine children. The victims, aged between eight and 11 years according to sources, were walking to school when the fatal explosion occurred. In a survey conducted in four provinces of Afghanistan in 2019, Save the Children found that two-thirds of parents reported that their children feared explosions, abduction, or other forms of severe violence on their
way to or from school, and two-thirds of children reported feeling unsafe at school.306

**Military use of schools and universities**

According to information reported by the UN, military use of educational facilities appeared to decline during the reporting period. In 2017, the UN verified 16 incidents in which schools or hospitals were used for military purposes.307 In 2018, the UN verified just five cases in which the Afghan National Army (ANA) or “ISKP” (i) used schools for military purposes.308

However, NGO and media sources continued to report cases of schools affected by military use throughout 2018. For example, the NRC reported that, from April until November 2018, armed forces or armed groups occupied at least ten schools in Faryab province alone. These included nine schools occupied by Afghan security forces and one school occupied by armed opposition groups. As of November 2018, most of these schools had been vacated, but NRC reported significant damages to the structures, and that children were continuing to stay home from school because of security concerns.309

Similarly, on March 21, 2018, Pakistan’s online local-regional media site The Frontier Post reported cases of military checkpoints established in schools in Lashkargah and Nad Ali districts, Helmand province, Afghanistan, noting that local sources reported significant damage to the school buildings. At Nad Ali High School, a student reported that the school building was no longer functional.310

In 2019, the UN verified the military use of seven schools.311 GCPEA also received reports of two schools used for military purposes.312 For example, The New York Times and The National reported, in March and April of 2019, that Assad Suri Primary School, in Zhari district, Kandahar province had been used for ten years, most recently by government armed forces, as well as by international forces and non-state armed groups in previous years. At the time of reporting, the school partially functioned, while police used several classrooms and erected a barracks within meters of the building. Reports also suggested that the school had sustained significant damages due to attacks.313

**Child recruitment at, or on the way to or from, school**

No incidents of child recruitment were reported at school or while children were en route to or from school during the reporting period. However, there was evidence that families at least perceived that recruitment was a risk for their children in and around school settings. According to OCHA, in 2018, three percent of primary school students and four percent of secondary school students were out of school because of fear of recruitment.314

In addition, GCPEA also received anecdotal evidence that non-state armed groups recruited children from madrassas during the reporting period.315 GCPEA also identified evidence of this during the previous reporting period covered in *Education under Attack 2018*.316

**Attacks on higher education**

GCPEA recorded reports of 23 attacks on higher education, including seven attacks in 2017,317 ten attacks in 2018,318 and six in 2019,319 which harmed over 100 students and education personnel. This rate was similar to the rate reported at the end of the 2013-2017 period covered in *Education under Attack 2018*. Many of the reported incidents involved detonation or defusal of explosive devices at or near university campuses, or attached to vehicles transporting university staff and students. In other incidents, armed actors fired ammunition at facilities or higher education students and personnel.

Attacks on higher education in 2018 included the following incidents:

- On April 15, 2018, gunmen riding a motorcycle opened fire on three guards outside Nangarhar University in Jalalabad City, Nangarhar province, killing all three of them, according to The New York Times.320 A similar attack occurred at Badakhshan University in Faizabad city, Badakhshan province, on August 23, 2018, when gunmen reportedly killed two policemen guarding the university.321

- On July 28, 2018, armed assailants attacked a school where at least 48 female students, most 18 or 19 years old, were enrolled in a two-year midwife program in Jalalabad city, Nangarhar province.322 The assault reportedly
In 2019, incidents of attack on higher education reportedly targeted both institutional facilities and people, often through explosive devices. For example:

- European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) reported that on June 2, 2019, a magnetic IED was reportedly detonated on a school bus transporting female students of the Shaheed Prof Rabbani University in Kabul, injuring ten female students and killing one adult. A second roadside explosion, reportedly targeting medical responders, injured at least seven others.

- According to Scholars at Risk, on July 19, 2019, at Kabul University, an unidentified perpetrator detonated an explosive device at the south gate of the campus, reportedly killing eight people and injuring 33.

- Scholars at Risk reported that on October 8, 2019, a bomb detonated in a classroom in the Faculty of Arts at Ghazni University, Ghazni province, while classes took place. At least 20 students were injured. A month earlier, a magnetic explosive device planted by an armed group reportedly detonated on a bus carrying Ghazni university students, injuring five students and killing the bus driver.

On November 19, 2019, the Government of Afghanistan negotiated the release of two foreign professors from the American University of Afghanistan who were abducted by the Taliban in May 2016, as reported in Education under Attack 2018. A prisoner exchange between the Taliban and the government secured their freedom.

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“Many Afghan Children Are Afraid to Go Outside, New Survey by Save the Children Finds,” Save the Children news release, November 19, 2019.


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Zabihullah Ghazi and Rod Nordland, “Extremists Kill 2 at Afghan School for Midwives, but Students Escape.”

Ruchi Kumar, “ISIS forcing universities to close in eastern Afghanistan,” The National, August 8, 2018.
