

# Practical Impact of the Safe Schools Declaration

Fact Sheet | October 2019

The Safe Schools Declaration and the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict (the Guidelines)* have succeeded in highlighting the issue of attacks on students, teachers, schools, and universities, and the military use of schools and universities as a global problem, and represent a coordinated international political response to address this problem. The Safe Schools Declaration was opened for endorsement in May 2015, and as of April 13, 2021, had been endorsed by 107 countries.

## Downward Trends in Incidents of Military Use of Schools

- The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) found that the overall reported incidents of military use of schools and universities declined between 2015 and 2018 in the 12 countries that endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration in 2015, and experienced at least one reported incident of military use of schools during the same period (**Afghanistan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Iraq, Kenya, Lebanon, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Palestine, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan**).
  - Based on UN, NGO, and media sources, GCPEA found at least 160 reported incidents of military use of schools and universities in 2015, as compared to at least 80 reported incidents in 2018, among these countries.
  - GCPEA found that reports of incidents of military use of schools and universities decreased in six of the 12 countries during the same time period (**Afghanistan, CAR, Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia, and South Sudan**).
  - In two of the 12 countries, reported incidents of military use remained the same (**Palestine and Sudan**); only one country saw an increase (**Niger**) during the same time period.
  - Reports of military use of schools or universities were few and infrequent in three of the 12 countries (**Kenya, Lebanon, and Mozambique**), and thus GCPEA was unable to determine any increase or decrease during 2015-2018.
- GCPEA has not identified any reports of military use of schools or universities by UN peacekeeping forces occurring since early 2017.

## Heightened International Standards on Military Use of Schools

- In June 2015, a month after the launch of the Safe Schools Declaration, the UN Security Council for the first time encouraged all member states “to take concrete measures to deter such [military] use of schools by armed forces and armed groups.”<sup>1</sup> In July 2018, the Security Council repeated this call.<sup>2</sup>
- The UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations developed a child protection policy that strengthens its policy banning use of educational facilities by peacekeepers, and notes that UN peace operations have an obligation to promote and adhere to the *Guidelines*.<sup>3</sup>
- The first public draft of the *Guidelines* was presented to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in June 2013. In the years since, three UN treaty bodies have made recommendations to 16 countries on strengthening protections for schools from military use, including to CAR the Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, and Thailand. (In contrast to five such recommendations in all previous years.)

## Increased Protection of Schools from Military Use in National Policy and Practice

- Following CAR’s endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration, the UN peacekeeping mission in the country issued a directive replicating much of the text of the *Guidelines*, and then stating that “the use of a school or university by a party to a conflict is not permitted.”<sup>4</sup> In 2015 and 2016, schools occupied by peacekeepers were vacated; and in another instance, peacekeepers turned down an offer to use a school for accommodation. Moreover, the directive reinforced the importance for the mission of protecting schools from military use, and in 2016, the mission successfully vacated five schools that were being occupied by armed groups in the country.
- In 2016, the Ministry of Education of Afghanistan wrote to the Ministry of Interior and the National Security Council calling on security forces to evacuate schools. Between 2016 and 2018, military use of schools significantly declined according to UN verified data.<sup>5</sup>
- In 2017, Sudan circulated a command order to all divisions prohibiting the military use of schools.<sup>6</sup> The UN verified that state security forces in Sudan vacated at least three schools in 2018.<sup>7</sup>
- In Somalia, in 2017, in the context of implementing the Declaration, the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) handed a number of educational buildings back to the authorities, rehabilitating them first, and working with partners to ensure the grounds were clear of explosive remnants.
- In 2017, Cameroon’s education minister cited the Safe Schools Declaration to encourage military personnel working as teachers in schools affected by the conflict with Boko Haram to carry out their educational actions in civilian clothes and without weapons.<sup>8</sup>
- Yemen endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration in October 2017, and in 2019 the Group of Experts on Yemen informed the UN Human Rights Council that “sources reported that the Yemeni armed forces have commenced to withdraw from some schools as per the commitments taken under the Safe Schools Declaration.”<sup>9</sup> The Ministry of Education has also established a Safe Schools Committee.
- The armed forces of Cote d’Ivoire have integrated a specific module on “the prohibition of occupation of schools and training institutions” into the trainings provided in military schools, academies, and training centers.<sup>10</sup>
- In response to engagement regarding implementation of the Declaration, Nigeria’s armed forces have ordered the military teachers to stop openly carrying weapons in schools. Acknowledging that the presence of military personnel within schools could place children at risk, the armed forces are reportedly making efforts to ensure that roadblocks are positioned in the area surrounding schools rather than within school compounds. In December 2018, a working group chaired by the Federal Ministry of Education proposed an amendment to the country’s Armed Forces Act that, if it becomes law, would ban the requisition by the armed forces of premises used for educational purposes. The working group has also developed an action plan for mainstreaming the Declaration in law and policies, including the development of dedicated legislation on the Safe Schools Declaration.
- In Mali in early 2019, the education ministry established a technical committee for operationalization of the Declaration, including two representatives from the defence ministry.
- Denmark,<sup>11</sup> Ecuador,<sup>12</sup> New Zealand,<sup>13</sup> and Switzerland<sup>14</sup> have updated their military manuals including explicit protections for schools from military use. The United Kingdom<sup>15</sup> and Norway<sup>16</sup> have updated their military policies to reflect their commitments.
- The Code of Conduct for the Palestinian National Security Forces in Lebanon, finalized in March 2019, includes special protections for “schools and universities”—a phrase that mirrors the formulation in the *Guidelines*, even though there are no universities in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.<sup>17</sup>
- Italy, Luxembourg, and Slovenia have announced their intentions to update their military manuals and doctrine to implement the commitment to protect schools from military use.<sup>18</sup>

## Increased Dialogue and Engagement, Particularly with Military Actors, Regarding Protecting Schools

- Strong cooperation and information sharing are instrumental in improving the protection of students, teachers, and schools. The three major international conferences on safe schools, in Oslo, Buenos Aires, and Palma de Mallorca, brought together defense, education, and foreign affairs representatives along with civil society to exchange examples of good practice in better protecting students, teachers, and schools.
- Through the framework of the Declaration, defense actors and representatives from ministries of education, UN agencies, and international NGOs, have participated in regional workshops organized by GCPEA to exchange promising practices and examples of increased implementation of the Declaration, including in Istanbul in 2015, Addis Ababa in 2016, and in Panama City in 2017.
- NGOs have used the *Guidelines* as a tool to engage with military or armed groups on the need to stop using schools.
- GCPEA, Geneva Call, and Human Rights Watch have trained representatives from armed forces, police forces, and non-state armed groups on the *Guidelines*. These trainings contributed to broadening the general appreciation by armed forces and groups of the need to protect schools and universities, and education itself. Save the Children successfully advocated for the issues of military use of schools and attacks on education to be incorporated into a NATO training scenario. The ICRC has offered technical advice to all interested parties regarding how to best implement the Declaration and *Guidelines* in specific contexts.
- Using the Safe Schools Declaration as an advocacy opportunity, GCPEA and its member organizations conducted at least 120 advocacy meetings with state representatives of at least 75 states in Geneva, New York, Brussels, Addis Ababa, and national capitals in 2018 alone. Even when states do not endorse the Safe Schools Declaration, the meetings require officials to be briefed on the issue of attacks on education and engage with the Declaration, resulting in better understanding.
- The Declaration has been highlighted during the UN Security Council Open Debates on Protection of Civilians, Children and Armed Conflict, and Women, Peace, and Security, as well as at the Human Rights Council. GCPEA estimates that at least 46 states delivered at least 229 individual statements positively referencing the Declaration during the period 2017-2019.
- High-level UN officials have expressed support for the Declaration, including UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who urged all states to endorse the Declaration in his annual reports on children and armed conflict in 2018 and 2019. The Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba, regularly calls for endorsement of the Declaration, and conducts bilateral advocacy with states to encourage endorsement and implementation. The former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, recommended that all states endorse the Declaration in his OHCHR report on protecting the rights of the child in humanitarian settings.
- The African Union's Peace and Security Council has welcomed the Declaration, urged its members to endorse, called for a strengthening of the *Guidelines*, and called on its members to "comply with International Humanitarian Law and ensure that schools are not used for military purposes."
- In its first Education in Emergencies policy communication, the European Commission voices support for the Declaration, declares that the EU "will support initiatives to promote and roll out the Safe Schools Declaration," and acknowledges that the practice of military use of schools increases violence in education settings, and negatively affects access to education.<sup>19</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2225 (2015).
- <sup>2</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2427 (2018).
- <sup>3</sup> Department of Peacekeeping Operations, Department of Field Support, Department of Political Affairs Policy on Child Protection, June 16, 2017, paras. 9, 16, & 34-37.
- <sup>4</sup> United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) directive on the protection of schools and universities against military use, from Special Representative to the Secretary General Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, MINUSCA/OSRSG/046/2015, December 24, 2015.
- <sup>5</sup> In 2018, the UN verified 5 cases of military use of schools as compared to 42 in 2016 and 17 in 2017, marking a decline of over 150 percent over the three-year period. UN Security Council, “Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict,” S/2019/509, July 30, 2018, para. 23; UN General Assembly and Security Council, “Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General,” S/2017/821, August 24, 2017, para. 28; and United Nations General Assembly and United Nations Security Council, “The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security,” S/2017/508, para. 26.
- <sup>6</sup> Information provided by the Office of the Special Representative to the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, April 2019.
- <sup>7</sup> UN Security Council, “Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict,” S/2019/509, July 30, 2019, para. 165.
- <sup>8</sup> Letter from Minister of Basic Education to Governor of the Far North Region, November 30, 2017.
- <sup>9</sup> Report of the detailed findings of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, A/HRC/42/CRP.1, September 3, 2019, para. 722.
- <sup>10</sup> Information from Legal Adviser for Military Operations, Ministry of Defence, Côte d’Ivoire.
- <sup>11</sup> Military Manual on the Law of the Danish Armed Forces in International Military Operations, September 2016, pp. 45, 115, & 154. Denmark released the manual in September 2016, before Denmark endorsed the Declaration, which occurred in May 2017. Nonetheless, the manual stated that “it is necessary ... to exercise restraint with respect to the military use of children’s institutions, including ... schools.” By the time an English translation of the manual was released in March 2019, after Denmark’s endorsement, it contained footnotes referencing the Declaration as a source of this proposition.
- <sup>12</sup> Armed Forces of Ecuador, Manual of International Humanitarian Law, DBM-DOC-CC.FF.AA-05-2016, May 2016, Chapter VIII, sec. D.
- <sup>13</sup> New Zealand Defence Force, Manual of Armed Forces Law: Law of Armed Conflict, DM 69 (2 ed), Volume 4, January 8, 2019. The manual explicitly references the *Guidelines* in a section on protecting and respecting schools.
- <sup>14</sup> Swiss Armed Forces manual on the law of armed conflict, addition of May 1, 2019. Just prior to the Second International Conference on Safe Schools in Argentina the Swiss government made public a draft update to the Swiss Armed Forces manual on the law of armed conflict adding explicit language protecting schools from military use. They then finalized this addition the same month as the Third International Conference on Safe Schools in Spain.
- <sup>15</sup> Ministry of Defence, Human Security in Military Operations, Part 1: Directive, JSP 1325, v. 1.0, January 2019, secs. 3:14, 6:1, 6:13, & 6:19-22.
- <sup>16</sup> Speech by Ms. Ine Eriksen Søreide, Minister of Defence, Norway, at the Oslo Conference on Safe Schools, May 29, 2015, Report of the Oslo Conference on Safe Schools, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oslo, Norway, 2015, p. 19.
- <sup>17</sup> Palestinian National Security Forces in Lebanon, Code of Conduct, March 20, 2019, part 6, art. 5: “The leadership of the Palestinian National Security Forces is committed to protecting ... schools and universities during armed violence and clashes. Equally, the civilian character of ... educational facilities should be preserved at all times. No attack on such facilities should be tolerated and concrete measures should be taken to avoid the military use of such institutions.” English translation provided by Geneva Call.
- <sup>18</sup> Italy: Policy Commitments 207055 and 207069, World Humanitarian Summit, 2016; Luxembourg: Policy Commitment 213039, World Humanitarian Summit, 2016; and Slovenia: Letter from Darja Bavdaž Kuret, State Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Slovenia, to Norway’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway, 12 April 2016.
- <sup>19</sup> European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on Education in Emergencies and Protracted Crises, COM (2018) 304, May 18, 2018.

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