

AFGHANISTAN

GCPEA identified over 130 attacks on schools during the 2020-2021 reporting period, primarily in the northern, eastern, and central provinces, and most involving explosive weapons. Armed groups continued to attack schoolteachers and students during the reporting period, with over 25 reported incidents. Also, university students, staff, and facilities were affected in over 25 reported incidents of attack.

Context

Afghanistan's security context deteriorated in 2020 and 2021, with Afghan National Forces and international forces, the Taliban, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), and other non-state armed groups battling for territorial control. Peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government from late 2020²²⁷ until July 2021 failed to achieve a settlement.²²⁸ Thus, as international forces, including the United States, began withdrawing troops in April 2021, the Taliban captured important administrative centers and finally took Kabul in August 2021.²²⁹

In 2020, the overall number of civilian casualties declined by 15 percent compared to 2019, according to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), and reached the lowest number since 2013.²³⁰ Contributing to a decrease in civilian casualties was a decline in both US military operations and major Taliban attacks after the two parties signed an agreement in February 2020.²³¹ However, violence and targeted attacks on civilians rose at the end of 2020²³² and into the first half of 2021: civilian casualties increased by 47 percent in the first six months of 2021 as compared to the same period in 2020.²³³ ISKP and other armed groups targeted civilians, including women, minority groups, journalists, and activists in early 2021, according to Human Rights Watch.²³⁴ Human Rights Watch also documented rights violations during and after the Taliban captured territories in 2021.²³⁵

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic and government measures to control it, amplified an already dire humanitarian situation. The UN reported that the Covid-19 pandemic drove the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance from 9.4 million in January 2020 to 18.4 million in January 2021.²³⁶ After the Taliban takeover, the country's economic crisis worsened, in part due to the freezing of funds by international donors and partners²³⁷. This had consequences on health, including sharp increases in child malnutrition, according to Save the Children.²³⁸

Conflict continued to affect access to education during the reporting period. The UN reported that more than 4.2 million children were out of school before the pandemic, 60 percent of whom were girls.²³⁹ An additional 7.5 million children from public schools and 500,000 from community-based education centers were affected by Covid-19 related school closures between March and September 2020.²⁴⁰ In addition, the UN documented 258 school closures in 2020 due to threats against education, general insecurity, or military use.²⁴¹ In the first half of 2021, insecurity forced the closure of over 920 schools, according to the Afghanistan Education in Emergencies Working Group.²⁴² The Taliban restricted girls' education in many areas under its control, although Human Rights Watch found that the armed group permitted some girls to attend school and even university in certain localities; in addition, harmful social norms also prevented families from sending girls to school or local governments from allowing girls to access education.²⁴³ In September 2021, following closures due to Covid-19 and conflict, the Taliban reopened boys' secondary schools but did not announce reopenings for girls' secondary schools, though some girls' schools did resume operating in certain regions;²⁴⁴ furthermore, the Taliban announced that women and girls could only attend segregated higher education spaces;²⁴⁵ all public universities remained closed at the end of 2021.²⁴⁶

Attacks on schools

GCPEA identified over 130 reported attacks on schools in 2020 and 2021. This represented an overall decline as compared to 2018 and 2019. Attacks on schools peaked in 2018 when the UN verified 192 attacks on schools and personnel, around half of which occurred when schools were used as polling stations in national elections.²⁴⁷ In 2019, the UN verified 70 attacks on schools.²⁴⁸ Though the overall number declined as compared to earlier years, GCPEA observed an increase in the proportion of attacks on schools using explosive weapons during the reporting period.²⁴⁹

In 2020, the UN verified 62 incidents of attacks on schools, students, and personnel that included both targeted or collateral attacks and threats, occurring most frequently in the eastern, northeastern, and northern regions of Afghani-

stan.²⁵⁰ The UN verified that the Taliban, “ISKP,” and undetermined non-state armed groups perpetrated at least 22 of the attacks, whereas Afghan government forces perpetrated about 20 incidents; the remainder of incidents took place during fighting between groups.²⁵¹ GCPEA could not determine how many UN-verified incidents were attacks on schools as compared with attacks on students or personnel.

In 2020, GCPEA also identified over 40 incident reports of attacks on schools from media, NGO, UN, and other sources.²⁵² These reports involved IED, UXO, or other explosives (23); airstrikes or ground-launched strikes (8); arson (6); looting (2); and gunfire (1), threats (1), and raiding (1). Takhar, Herat, Nangarhar, Wardak were the provinces most heavily affected.

Attacks on schools that used explosive devices occurred frequently in 2020. For example:

- The UN, *The New York Times*, and local media reported that an IED exploded inside a madrassa in Archi district, Kunduz on February 11 or 12, 2020. The blast killed five students and wounded three.²⁵³
- On October 9, 2020, an explosive device allegedly detonated inside a recently built school in Kandawalo, Zheray district, Kandahar region, according to local media. The explosion caused extensive damage to the school.²⁵⁴
- On October 24, 2020, an explosive attached to a suicide bomber detonated outside of the Kaswar-e Danish tutoring center in Kabul, killing at least 24 and injuring 57. The Ministry of Health reported to *Al Jazeera* that most of the victims of the attack were students between the ages of 15 and 26. The tutoring center prepared children and young adults, many of whom belonged to the minority Hazara group, for higher education. Reports did not indicate any damage to the facility.²⁵⁵

In 2020, some examples of attacks on schools involving air-launched or ground-launched bombs, shelling, and mortars included:

- On February 2, 2020, an air-launched strike by the Afghan Air Force in Kunduz damaged a school, according to the UN and local media.²⁵⁶
- The UN reported that in March 2020, “ISKP” launched rockets during the ceremony to swear in President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul. A rocket damaged a school.²⁵⁷
- On October 21, 2020, an airstrike by Afghan armed forces struck a madrassa in Hazara Qurluq town, Takhar province, and killed eleven students and an instructor, according to Human Rights Watch and international media. The Afghan Ministry of Defense claimed that the attack was an offensive that targeted the Taliban and not the school.²⁵⁸

In 2020, non-state armed groups also burned schools, primarily in Takhar province, but also in Baghlan and Nangarhar. One incident involved a girls’ school:

- On February 3, 2020, local media reported that a non-state armed group suspected to be the Taliban burned the Bodala Girls School in Taloqan, Takhar province. The spokesperson for the Ministry of Interior reported to *Pajhwok Afghan News* that school equipment and books were destroyed in the fire.²⁵⁹
- The UN verified that the Taliban set a high school on fire in Takhar province on July 15, 2020, destroying the facilities including a library and laboratory.²⁶⁰ The school had served 1,000 male and female students.²⁶¹ *Salaam Times* reported that on same day the Taliban had used a high school in Taloqan, Takhar province after allegedly using the building as a firing position in a battle against Afghan forces, after which they burned the building which had been vacant due to Covid-19 restrictions. GCPEA could not confirm whether the two reports described the same school.²⁶²
- Early in the morning of August 13, 2020, unidentified armed assailants reportedly set fire to Abu Usman Taloqani High School in Taloqan city, Takhar province. A spokesperson for the Ministry of Education reported to *Pajhwok Afghan News* that six classrooms and three offices were completely destroyed. The school served around 3,000 students.²⁶³

In 2021, reported attacks on schools appeared to increase as compared to the previous year. This increase occurred as the Taliban forces took control of several key cities in the country. Over the year, GCPEA identified at least 76 reported

incidents of attacks on schools from media, government, and NGO sources; around 40 attacks involved explosive weapons, three reports of threats, three reports of arson, one report of crossfire, and the rest undetermined.²⁶⁴ The use of explosive weapons in attacks on schools harmed nearly 200 students and teachers, the majority of whom were women and girls. At the time of writing, UN data was only available between January and June 2021, when the UN verified 42 incidents of targeted or collateral attacks on schools and school personnel.²⁶⁵

Examples of attacks using explosive weapons in 2021 included:

- ACLED reported that around February 14, 2021, shelling struck a school playground in Khwaja Baha Wuddin, Takhar province, killing one student and injuring another.²⁶⁶
- On May 3, 2021, at least ten students were injured when a hand grenade reportedly detonated near the Mirman Nazo school in Farah city, according to international and local media sources.²⁶⁷
- On May 8, 2021, in one of the deadliest attacks on schools in Afghanistan in the reporting period, an armed group detonated three IEDs near Sayed-ul-Shuhada High School in Dasht-e-Barchi neighborhood, Kabul, as students exited the building at the end of the school day. As many as 90 people, were killed and another 240 were injured; reports indicated that the vast majority of casualties were female teenage students. Reports also indicated damage to school materials.²⁶⁸
- On or around May 15, 2021, unidentified gunmen allegedly burned a school in Nahr-i-Saraj district, Helmand province, according to local media and ACLED.²⁶⁹
- On August 8, 2021, airstrikes hit a school in Lashkargah city, Helmand province, according to the *Associated Press*; photographic evidence showed damage to the building and school materials, including computers.²⁷⁰ Afghan armed forces acknowledged launching operations in the area but did not claim to have struck the school.
- On October 6, 2021, an explosive device detonated inside Mazharul Ulom religious school in Khost city, according to the UN and media sources. A student was allegedly attempting to defuse the bomb when it exploded. The attack killed one student and injured around 17 others.²⁷¹

Examples of incidents involving arson, raids, or looting by alleged armed groups in 2021 included:

- On June 24, 2021, Save the Children reported that, in Kandahar province, dozens of schools had been burnt down, and an unexploded mortar shell had detonated, in Nangahar province, injuring six children.²⁷²
- On July 13, 2021, the Taliban allegedly burned down a girls' school in Ghazni city, according to local media.²⁷³
- Around September 5, 2021, the Taliban reportedly attacked the Afghanistan National Institute of Music,²⁷⁴ The Institute was a specialized music school which also offered full academic instruction for students in Grades 4 through 14.²⁷⁵

Attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel

During the 2020-2021 reporting period, GCPEA identified at least 27 incidents of attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel, five of which affected women and girls. These attacks appeared to remain somewhat constant with earlier years; GCPEA identified ten reported incidents of attacks on school students and teachers in 2019 and around 20 in 2018.²⁷⁶ Reports included cases of targeted threats, abductions, or killings of education professionals by non-state armed groups, as well as improvised explosive devices along school routes.

In 2020, GCPEA identified reports of at least 16 attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel.²⁷⁷ All of the incidents identified by GCPEA involved threats, abduction, or targeted killings of students or educators and over half of all reports took place between September and December 2020. This uptick at the end of 2020 corresponds with an overall increase in targeted assassinations by non-state armed groups coinciding with the beginning of intra-Afghan dialogue in September 2020. Examples included:

- On August 19, 2020, in Kabul, an explosive detonated, targeting a Ministry of Education car that was carrying the head of the Scientific Council of the Ministry of Education. Reports said that the explosion killed the official and his guard.²⁷⁸

- On August 28, 2020, ISKP detonated a remote-controlled IED that targeted a teacher who was on his way home from school in Nangarhar province, according to the UN. The explosion wounded the teacher, who was targeted for his perceived opposition to ISKP, and a student.²⁷⁹
- On October 17, 2020, a non-state armed group alleged to be the Taliban reportedly killed a school principal and teacher at Shemar Secondary School in Taloqan city, Takhar province. According to media reports, the Taliban had targeted religious scholars and school teachers perceived to be in support of the government.²⁸⁰
- The UN verified that on October 24, 2020, the Taliban shot and killed a teacher while he was on his way home from a mosque in Balkh province. The teacher was targeted for his work at the Department of Education as well as for expressing opposing views to the Taliban.²⁸¹

In 2021, GCPEA identified at least 11 reported incidents of attacks against educators, including threats, killings, and abductions.²⁸² Several incidents directly targeted female educators or educators providing education to girls. Examples included:

- On February 3, 2021, local media reported that unidentified armed assailants killed the principal of a private school in Jalalabad city, Nangarhar province.²⁸³
- The Aid Worker Security Database reported that on August 8, 2021, Taliban fighters kidnapped and tortured an administrator of a girls' school operated by an NGO in Khoja Lakan, Paghman district, Kabul province. The Taliban released the educator on August 11, 2021.²⁸⁴
- On an unspecified date in 2021, the Taliban made death threats to a female high school teacher who formerly taught mixed-gender sports in school, according to reports received by Amnesty International. The teacher, who went into hiding after receiving the threats, had also received a court summons.²⁸⁵
- Local media reported that on December 25, 2021, the Taliban detained approximately 150 high school students who were protesting the appointment of a new principal at their school in Zaranj, Nimroz province. In one report, the Taliban confirmed the arrest of the students but denied any violence against them.²⁸⁶

Military use of schools and universities

GCPEA identified several reports of the military use of schools during the 2020-2021 reporting period, at a similar rate as in previous years. For example, the UN verified seven cases of military use of schools in 2019²⁸⁷ and five cases in 2018.²⁸⁸

In 2020, the UN verified five cases of military use of schools.²⁸⁹ Also in 2020, GCPEA identified qualitative reports from the UN that both non-state armed groups and Afghan armed forces or police used educational facilities for military purposes.²⁹⁰

In 2021, GCPEA identified at least nine reported incidents of military use of education facilities by Afghan security forces and non-state armed groups.²⁹¹ For example:

- On February 16, 2021, Afghan troops reportedly vacated Taliban forces from Babar school in Arghandab district, Kandahar region, according to the Ministry of Defense.²⁹²
- The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan reported in June 2021 that a resource center for teachers that it operated inside a government school in Qarabagh district, Ghazni province, had been occupied by the Taliban for at least two months.²⁹³
- Amnesty International received reports that the Taliban used four schools for military purposes during fighting for territorial control: two high schools in Sar-e-Pul city, one high school in Kunduz city, and one high school in Alishing district, Lagman province.²⁹⁴ GCPEA could not determine the dates and duration of the use.
- *The New York Times* reported that the Taliban seized the American University in Afghanistan's campus on or shortly after August 15, 2021, and that it remained occupied at the end of September 2021. The Taliban allegedly replaced the university's own flag with the armed group's flag.²⁹⁵

Attacks on higher education

For the 2020-2021 reporting period, GCPEA identified at least 25 incidents of attacks on higher education in Afghanistan, 16 of which were attacks on higher education students and staff and nine of which were attacks on facilities. Non-state armed groups continued to attack scholars and students during the reporting period or used explosive devices or arson to damage tertiary education facilities. Attacks on higher education increased slightly as compared to the previous reporting period, where GCPEA identified six attacks on higher education in 2019 and ten in 2018.²⁹⁶

In 2020, GCPEA identified at least ten incidents of attacks on higher education, which included four attacks on higher education students and personnel²⁹⁷ and six incidents of attacks on higher education facilities. These incidents took place in Baghlan, Ghor, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz, Nangarhar, Paktia, and Wardak provinces.

Examples of attacks on higher education facilities in 2020 included:

- On March 23, 2020, an explosive device attached to a motorcycle reportedly detonated outside the gates of Paktia University, in Gardez city, Paktia province, according to Scholars at Risk and *The New York Times*. A police officer was killed and a civilian was injured, though the reports did not state whether the civilian was a student or staff at the university.²⁹⁸
- On November 2, 2020, gunmen stormed Kabul University campus where they detonated explosives, engaged in gunfight with state security forces, and held dozens of students and staff hostage in classrooms. The attack, later claimed by the Islamic State, lasted over five hours; at least 22 students were killed and over 22 wounded.²⁹⁹

Examples of attacks on higher education staff in 2020 included:

- Scholars at Risk reported that on June 2, 2020, an explosive device was placed inside a mosque in Kabul, killing a professor at Kabul University who was a religious scholar and Imam at the mosque. According to Scholars at Risk, security professionals deemed the attack as targeted and following a pattern of other attacks on religious scholars and intellectuals.³⁰⁰
- On September 4, 2020, unidentified assailants reportedly shot and killed a professor of Pashto literature at the University of Nangarhar, in Khogyani district, Nangarhar province. According to Scholars at Risk, the professor was on his way to work at the university when the attack occurred.³⁰¹

In 2021, GCPEA identified at least 15 incidents of attacks on higher education which included three reported attacks on university facilities and twelve reported attacks on higher education faculty and students.³⁰² Targeted killings of professors appeared to increase in 2021 as compared to 2020. GCPEA also identified reports of threats against female scholars and students after the Taliban gained control of the country in August 2021.

Attacks on higher education personnel in 2021 included.

- On February 18, 2021, a Kabul university lecturer was reportedly killed when an explosive device placed on his car detonated while he was driving near the university. Scholars at Risk noted that the identity of a second victim was not confirmed, with some reports alleging that the passenger was another lecturer and others claiming that it was a student.³⁰³
- On March 16, 2021, media reported that unidentified gunmen shot at a university bus traveling in Pol-e-Khomri district, Baghlan province. The bus driver and a student died, and six other students were injured. The students and teachers were traveling to Baghlan University where they were members of the Faculty of Agriculture.³⁰⁴
- Scholars at Risk and media sources reported that on May 29, 2021, an explosive device attached to a minibus carrying students and staff of Al-Beroni University exploded in Parwan province. The blast killed at least three university staff and injured several students who were traveling from Parwan province to the university in Kapisa province. The government claimed that the attack was targeted and carried out via a remote-control, however no group claimed responsibility.³⁰⁵
- On August 17, 2021, Taliban soldiers positioned themselves in front of Herat University and barred female students and educators from entering campus, according to Scholars at Risk and *The New York Times*.³⁰⁶

- In September 2021, an Afghan academic published a brief in the academic journal *Nature* on the potential implications of Taliban rule on maternal healthcare and named an Afghan university in her list of affiliated institutions. Following publication, colleagues at the Afghan university reported receiving threats.³⁰⁷
- On November 3, 2021, Taliban soldiers allegedly beat and opened gunfire on a professor of a Kateb Private University in Kabul. The professor told the media that the Taliban had targeted him for wearing a “Western” style suit and collaborating with foreign universities. Some reports also claimed that the university’s dean was injured in the attack.³⁰⁸

Attacks on higher education facilities in 2021 included:

- Local media reported that on February 2, 2021, an unidentified armed group burned down the Peace and Freedom Business Institute in Daka town, Momandara district, Nangarhar province. The governor of Nangarhar reported that the fire damaged two classrooms and some equipment.³⁰⁹
- Local media reported that on April 18, 2021, a rocket fell next to the Sharia Faculty building at Kabul University, in Kabul city. No injuries were reported.³¹⁰

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²⁴⁰ “Afghanistan Humanitarian Situation Report No. 3 January 1 – December 31, 2020,” UNICEF, January 2021, p. 1. “Humanitarian Action for Children Afghanistan,” UNICEF, December 2020, p. 2.

²⁴¹ UNAMA, *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Annual Report 2020*, p. 39.

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