

BURKINA FASO

Attacks on schools, school students and education personnel continued at a high rate during the 2020-2021 reporting period. Over 250 school students and personnel were abducted, injured, killed, or otherwise harmed by armed groups in 2020 and 2021. In addition, GCPEA identified over 145 reports of threatened or actual attacks on schools. State security forces used excessive force against student protesters in several cases.

Context

Burkina Faso confronted multiple security threats during the 2020-2021 reporting period. After reaching a peak in conflict-related deaths in March 2020, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) found that fatalities from conflict declined through mid-2021;³⁴⁶ ACLED and media sources attributed the decline to fragile ceasefire negotiations between armed groups and the government.³⁴⁷ In December 2021, the prime minister and government resigned amid violent protests criticizing the state's response to the armed conflict.³⁴⁸

The Central Sahel crisis, which affected the border areas between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, reached unprecedented levels of fighting and insecurity during the reporting period, according to the UN.³⁴⁹ Non-state armed groups, such as the al-Qaeda linked Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), an IS affiliate, frequently fought each other and attacked civilians in Burkina Faso's northern and eastern regions.³⁵⁰ In 2020, ISGS and JNIM, who were previously aligned, began battling each other.³⁵¹ On June 5, 2021, Burkina Faso experienced its most deadly attack since hostilities began, when an armed group killed at least 130 people in Solhan, Nord-Est region.³⁵²

In addition, state security forces killed or arbitrarily detained civilians whom they suspected of belonging to armed groups. Human Rights Watch documented summary executions of hundreds of civilians, many of whom were of the Fulani ethnic group, including mass killings in Djibo.³⁵³ In 2020, Burkinabe authorities passed legislation formalizing support for self-defense groups (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie, or VDP). These militias also perpetrated violence against civilian populations, according to Human Rights Watch.³⁵⁴

Burkina Faso was one of the fastest growing displacement crises in the world during the reporting period.³⁵⁵ Over 1.4 million people were internally displaced in Burkina Faso by late 2021,³⁵⁶ compared to around 149,000 in April 2019.³⁵⁷ In December 2021, the UN estimated that 4.7 million Burkinabé needed humanitarian assistance, including 2.6 million children.³⁵⁸

Both conflict and Covid-19 impacted education during the reporting period. In mid-March 2020, prior to Covid-19 lockdowns, over 2,500 schools had already shut due to attacks or insecurity.³⁵⁹ In December 2021, 3,280 schools were closed, or over 13 percent of the country's schools, affecting more than 510,000 learners; in some areas of Nord and Est regions, all schools were closed due to insecurity.³⁶⁰ In the Sahel, Est, Nord and Centre regions, a REACH assessment in November 2020 found that the lack of teachers disrupted education services.³⁶¹ Only one-third of schools reported to have fully functioning remote learning in place in April and May 2020, according to an Education Cluster survey.³⁶²

Attacks on schools

During the 2020-2021 reporting period, GCPEA identified over 145 reported incidents of attacks on schools. In most incidents, non-state armed groups, generally suspected of belonging to either JNIM or ISGS, looted, burned, and vandalized schools, or threatened to do so. Attacks in 2020 occurred at a similarly high rate as in 2019, when GCPEA identified over 100 attacks on schools.³⁶³ In February 2020, a local media source citing the Ministry of Education reported that over 600 schools had been destroyed by armed groups, though the report did not specify a time period.³⁶⁴

In 2020, the UN verified 70 attacks on schools, attributed to unidentified perpetrators, ISGS, and JNIM.³⁶⁵ Also in 2020, through government, media, and UN sources, GCPEA identified 41 reported incidents of attacks on schools;³⁶⁶ at least 33 incidents took place in Est region,³⁶⁷ four in the Sahel region,³⁶⁸ three in Boucle de Mouhoun region,³⁶⁹ one in Centre-Nord region,³⁷⁰ and one in Loroum.³⁷¹ In addition, Human Rights Watch identified 25 news reports of school burnings between April and August 2020, primarily in Est, Nord, and Boucle de Mouhoun regions.³⁷² GCPEA could not determine whether the UN and Human Rights Watch reporting overlapped with each other, or with other reports collated by GCPEA.

Examples of attacks on schools in 2020 included:

- Between January 9 and 11, 2020, Human Rights Watch documented at least five attacks on schools in four villages in Logoubou commune, Tapoa province, Est region. In one incident on January 9, 2020, in Nagaré village, armed men set fire to the teachers' offices at a secondary school and burned school property, as well as threatening teachers.³⁷³
- Local media *Infowakat* reported that on March 13, 2020, members of an unidentified armed group reportedly vandalized and then burned down a primary school in Djibo, Soum province, Sahel region.³⁷⁴
- According to local media reports, on the night of July 27, 2020, gunmen allegedly set fire to 11 primary schools and one middle school in Tansarga department, Tapoa province, Est region.³⁷⁵
- The Burkina Faso Protection Cluster reported that, around October 15, 2020, unidentified armed assailants attacked a public primary school and destroyed its solar panels and batteries in Delga, Banh province, Lorum region. The group reportedly returned to the village, threatening the population to follow "Islamic doctrine."³⁷⁶

In 2021, GCPEA identified at least 78 reported incidents of attacks on schools. As in earlier years, many of the reports, which came from media, UN, government, and NGOs, described actual or threatened looting, arson, or other damage of schools.³⁷⁷ In 2021, the UN verified 46 attacks on schools.³⁷⁸ For instance, in Gnanga district, Est region, local media and government reported that around 12 schools were looted or damaged by armed groups in second half of May 2021.³⁷⁹ Examples of attacks on schools also included:

- On February 2, 2021, unidentified armed assailants reportedly stormed Niagassi village in Sampelga district, Séno province, Sahel region, where they broke into the school and looted supplies, according to the Burkina Faso Protection Cluster.³⁸⁰
- The Burkina Faso Protection Cluster reported that on February 10, 2021, members of a non-state armed group looted the school in Koulfo, Manni district, Gnagna province, Est region, after threatening primary and middle school teachers.³⁸¹
- On April 24, 2021, an armed group threatened nine primary schools in Bogandé, Gnagna district, Est region, causing them to close, according to the Ministry of Education.³⁸²
- The Ministry of Education reported that on May 22, 2021, four schools in Manni, Gnagna province, Est region were closed after an armed group threatened them.³⁸³
- On October 15, 2021, ACLED and local media *Net Afrique* reported that members of an armed group forced schools to close, and threatened violence if schools reopened, in four villages in Sourou district, Boucle de Mouhoun region. *Net Afrique* also reported that the armed group wrote a threatening message on the school's door.³⁸⁴

Attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel

For the 2020-2021 reporting period, GCPEA identified at least 33 attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel, harming over 250 students and teachers. In the majority of incidents, non-state armed groups threatened, abducted, or killed teachers or school staff, often at the same time as they attacked a school or the surrounding village. These attacks often caused schools to close or teachers to stop working. In some cases, insecurity also affected students on the way to or from school. GCPEA collected 18 reports of such instances in 2019, and five reports in 2018;³⁸⁵ thus, numbers in 2020 and 2021 are consistent with the incline in recent years. However, the closures of schools during the Covid-19 pandemic may have caused fewer attacks than would have otherwise occurred.

In 2020, GCPEA identified at least ten reported incidents of attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel from UN, NGO, and media reports.³⁸⁶ Between January and April 2020, 222 education workers were "victims of terrorist attacks," according to the Ministry of Education, as cited by Amnesty International.³⁸⁷ Many incidents took place alongside attacks on schools and sometimes occurred while students were at school. For example:

- On January 4, 2020, a convoy of three public buses hit an IED on the road between Toéni and Tougan towns, in Sourou province, Boucle de Mouhoun region. The buses were carrying many students who were traveling back to Tougan from Toéni after holidays. Human Rights Watch reported that since schools closed in Toéni in 2018,

hundreds of students had to enroll in Tougan.³⁸⁸ Local education professionals reported to Human Rights Watch that they believed the attack had targeted students since it was the day that students had to return to school after holidays.³⁸⁹

- Human Rights Watch reported that, on an unspecified date in January 2020, around ten armed men forcibly entered a village school in Est region while students were in class. The men fired shots, temporarily detained two teachers beat and robbed them, and stole personal items from teachers and students, as well as school materials.³⁹⁰
- On October 15, 2020, armed assailants allegedly killed a primary school principal, whose body was found near Markoye, Oudalan province, Sahel region, according to the UN and local news. The attack occurred days after the school year began.³⁹¹
- On November 20, 2020, an armed group threatened teachers at Tomonga primary school in Manni district, Est region. Following the threats, the school closed and the teachers fled the village.³⁹²

In 2021, GCPEA collected at least 23 reports of incidents of attack on school students, teachers, and other education personnel, from NGO and media reports. Of these, 16 were incidents of attacks on teachers and school personnel by armed groups.³⁹³ Between January and September 2021, the UN verified five attacks on school personnel, including the abduction of two teachers.³⁹⁴ Incidents of attacks by armed groups included:

- On January 18, 2021, the Protection Cluster reported that a 14-year-old female student was abducted while returning home from school in Diapangou, Gourma province, Est region.³⁹⁵
- Local media reported that on March 14, 2021, suspected members of an armed group abducted the treasurer of the parents-teacher association of the high school in Zoura, Koungossi district, Bam province, Centre-Nord region.³⁹⁶
- On October 21, 2021, according to local media *Minute*, armed individuals abducted several teachers during an attack on two schools near Namounou, Tapoa district, Est region. The teachers were released later the same day but had been stripped of their personal belongings.³⁹⁷

Additionally, in April and May 2021, high school students protested against government reforms to the baccalaureate exams and were met with excessive force by police.³⁹⁸ Police arrested or used excessive force, including teargas, against school students in at least seven reported incidents in several cities including Ouagadougou, Koudougou, Boulsa, and Fada N'gourma.³⁹⁹

Incidents of use of force against student protesters included:

- On April 29, 2021, hundreds of students reportedly protested in front of the Ministry of Education in Ouagadougou against reforms to the exams system. Media sources reported that police used teargas to disperse the students, who retaliated by throwing stones at the officers.⁴⁰⁰
- On May 10, 2021, local media reported that students in Boulsa, Namentenga, Centre-Nord region, protested in front of the town's high commission. Police allegedly engaged in running battles and used teargas against students.⁴⁰¹
- On May 17 and 18, 2021, high school students protested against exam reforms in Ouagadougou. A special security branch of the police allegedly used teargas and rubber bullets and arrested around eight students.⁴⁰² Students reportedly threw stones and damaged a high school building.⁴⁰³

Military use of schools and universities

GCPEA identified a number of reported incidents of the military use of schools between 2020 and 2021. In 2018 and 2019, both state armed forces and non-state armed groups used over a dozen schools in Centre-Nord and Sahel regions.⁴⁰⁴

In 2020, GCPEA identified at least four incidents of military use of schools. In January 2020, Human Rights Watch documented that state security forces used a school in Pensa, Bam province, Centre-Nord region which then provoked an

attack by an armed group.⁴⁰⁵ In addition, Human Rights Watch received reports that state armed forces used at least three schools as bases between April and August 2020.⁴⁰⁶

In 2021, the UN verified the military use of two schools.⁴⁰⁷ In the same year, GCPEA identified one reported incident of the military use of a school. Local media *Lefaso* reported that in Madou, Sanmatenga district, Centre-Nord region, between June 28 and July 1, 2021, Burkina Faso forces targeted a primary school where an armed group had established its base.⁴⁰⁸ In addition, the UN verified one case of military use of a school between January and September 2021;⁴⁰⁹ GCPEA could not determine whether this overlapped with the above report.

Sexual violence at, or on the way to or from, school or university

GCPEA identified reports of sexual violence at, or on the way to or from school or university during the 2020-2021 reporting period. During the period covered by *Education under Attack 2020*, GCPEA did not receive any such reports.

In 2021, a witness reported to *France24* that during an attack on a school, the armed group raped a female teacher inside a classroom on an unspecified date.⁴¹⁰ The witness reported experiencing lasting psychosocial trauma.

Attacks on higher education

During the 2020-2021 reporting period, GCPEA collected one reported incident of an attack on higher education. As in previous years, these attacks occurred sporadically and generally involved the use of force or arrest of students by state security forces. In 2019, GCPEA identified two reported incidents of attacks on higher education at the Polytechnic University of Dori.⁴¹¹

In 2020, GCPEA identified one media report of an attack on higher education. On March 31, 2020, local media reported that gendarmes entered Kossodo University campus in Ouagadougou and used force against students for not respecting a curfew imposed to curb the spread of Covid-19. Students reportedly barricaded the campus and clashed with gendarmes, who then used teargas against students.⁴¹²

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³⁴⁷ "Sahel 2021: Communal Wars, Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines." Sam Mednick, "EXCLUSIVE: Burkina Faso's secret peace talks and fragile jihadist ceasefire," *The New Humanitarian*, March 11, 2021.

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³⁵² "In Burkina Faso, two suspected jihadists indicted after Solhan attack (Au Burkina Faso, deux jihadistes présumés mis en examen après l'attaque de Solhan)," *France24*, June 29, 2021. Héni Nsaibia and Jules Duhamel, "Sahel 2021: Communal Wars, Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines," ACLED, June 17, 2021. "Following the armed attack in Solhan, UNICEF provides emergency assistance to 9,000 displaced children and their families," UNICEF press release, June 24, 2021. Human Rights Watch, "Sahel: Top UN Rights Official Visits Burkina Faso, Niger," Human Rights Watch News Release, December 1, 2021.

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³⁵⁶ UNICEF, "UNICEF Burkina Faso Humanitarian Situation Report No. 4: 1 July to 30 September 2021," UNICEF, November 30, 2021, p.1; "Burkina Faso: Humanitarian snapshot (Burkina Faso: Aperçu de la situation humanitaire)," March 10, 2021.

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