

# COLOMBIA

*Attacks on schools, military use of educational facilities, and child recruitment at, or on the way to or from, school increased in 2022 and 2023 as Colombia experienced armed violence. Despite ceasefire and peace negotiations between the government and several armed groups, attacks on education occurred across at least one third of the departments in Colombia, with Antioquia, Cauca, Norte de Santander, and Valle del Cauca some of the most affected.*

## CONTEXT

During the 2022-2023 reporting period, Colombia continued to experience armed violence despite peace accords signed in 2016 between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo – FARC-EP).<sup>1</sup> The lead-up to presidential elections held in May 2022 coincided with an increase in political violence, according to the Electoral Observation Mission.<sup>2</sup> As part of its “total peace” policy, which sought the negotiated disarmament of armed groups, the government announced ceasefires with five non-state armed groups at various points during 2022 and 2023. Among them, the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) and the government signed a ceasefire agreement in June 2023.<sup>3</sup> However, the ceasefires faced significant hurdles and some groups did not adhere to them.<sup>4</sup> For instance, a ceasefire signed between the government and the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia – AGC) in December 2022 was suspended months later by the government, according to media reports.<sup>5</sup>

Non-state armed groups remained active during the reporting period, including FARC dissident groups and the ELN, as well as groups, such as the AGC, that succeeded the paramilitary groups that officially demobilized in the mid-2000s. Armed violence perpetrated by non-state armed groups increased in some rural regions of Colombia, disproportionately affecting women social leaders, leaders from Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities, and former FARC-EP combatants.<sup>6</sup> In 2022, at least 215 human rights defenders and social leaders were killed, many by armed groups, the highest number since 2016, according to the Ombudsperson's Office.<sup>7</sup> Non-state armed groups restricted movement and prohibited communities from leaving their homes using threats and violence, contributing to the forced confinement of at least 102,000 people in 2022 and 88,000 people in 2023; these confinements disproportionately affected Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities.<sup>8</sup>

Armed conflict forced at least 63,200 people to flee in large-group displacements during 2023.<sup>9</sup> The UN reported that 8.3 million people, nearly one-third of them children, were in need of humanitarian assistance in 2023 due to violence, disasters, and internal displacement.<sup>10</sup> However, over 20,000 people in 2023 faced

limitations to accessing humanitarian assistance as non-state armed groups imposed restrictions on aid organizations.<sup>11</sup>

Armed violence continued to impact education in 2022 and 2023. When in effect, forced confinements in the north of the country prevented at least two million students from attending classes in person during the reporting period, according to the Coalition Against the Involvement of Children and Youth in Armed Conflict in Colombia (COALICO).<sup>12</sup>

In November 2022, Colombia became the 116<sup>th</sup> country to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration.<sup>13</sup>

## ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS

During the 2022-2023 reporting period, GCPEA identified at least 41 reports of attacks on schools in Colombia. These attacks occurred primarily in rural areas across about a third of the country's 32 departments. Many incidents involved improvised explosive devices (IEDs) installed at or near schools; however, confrontations in the vicinity of schools between armed groups, or an armed group and government forces, also occurred, among other types of attacks. At least one school serving Indigenous students and one serving Afro-Colombian students were impacted during the reporting period. The number of reported attacks on schools increased slightly compared to the previous reporting period, when GCPEA identified approximately 15 incidents in 2021 and around 19 in 2020.<sup>14</sup>

In 2022, COALICO documented 23 incidents of attacks on, or military use of, educational institutions spread across several departments, with Córdoba, Norte de Santander, and Valle del Cauca departments particularly affected.<sup>15</sup> However, it was unclear how many of these were attacks on schools, rather than military use. Separately, the UN verified four attacks damaging schools that year.<sup>16</sup> Since some of the attacks may have overlapped with incidents collected by GCPEA, the incidents from COALICO and the UN were not included in the total number of attacks on schools, to avoid double counting. During 2022, insecurity led to the closure of schools in multiple departments, including Antioquia and Nariño.<sup>17</sup>

GCPEA collected approximately 22 reports of attacks on schools in 2022, with Arauca, Cauca, Chocó, Valle del Cauca, and Norte de Santander departments most impacted.<sup>18</sup> Around half of reported incidents involved IEDs emplaced near schools; others included armed confrontations in the vicinity of schools, lootings, or vandalism carried out by alleged armed groups and other forms of attack. Examples of IEDs reportedly installed near schools in 2022 included:

- In a rural area of Dagua municipality, Valle del Cauca department, an IED was reportedly planted near a school, along a path students take to class, sometime before early February 2022. The Colombian army performed a controlled detonation of the explosive device, according to local media *Semana*.<sup>19</sup>
- On July 27, 2022, two explosives were planted near a preschool and secondary school in the middle of the night, in Tibú, Norte de Santander, leading administrators to suspend classes, affecting around 2,000 stu-

dents, as reported by *Semana*. The Colombian army performed a controlled detonation of the explosive devices.<sup>20</sup>

- In mid-November 2022, three IEDs were planted a few meters from a school in a rural area of Puerto Rondón municipality, Arauca department, preventing more than 25 students and several teachers from entering the school for several days, as reported by a local media outlet. Colombian army troops performed a controlled detonation of the explosive devices.<sup>21</sup>

GCPEA also collected several reports of armed confrontations near schools or school infrastructure in 2022, one of which impacted Indigenous communities. For example:

- On May 9, 2022, an armed clash took place near a school in Mazamorrero area, Buenos Aires municipality, Cauca department, as reported by a local media outlet.<sup>22</sup>
- On July 22, 2022, an armed clash reportedly took place near a school, while students were in attendance, in Corinto municipality, Cauca department. A local media outlet reported that unidentified armed men attacked a police post in the town, which is next to the school.<sup>23</sup>
- On August 3, 2022, an armed clash reportedly took place near a school on the Las Delicias Indigenous community reservation in Buenos Aires municipality, Cauca department. A local news outlet reported that Indigenous guards evacuated the students from the school to keep them away from the crossfire.<sup>24</sup>

In 2023, COALICO documented 46 incidents of attacks on education and military use, including attacks on educational institutions, spread across several departments, with Antioquia, Cauca, and Valle del Cauca departments particularly affected.<sup>25</sup> Separately, the UN reported 24 attacks on schools, including threats or attacks against students or education personnel.<sup>26</sup> However, it was unclear how many of these were attacks on schools, rather than attacks on education personnel or incidents of military use. Since some of the attacks may have overlapped with incidents collected by GCPEA, the COALICO and UN counts were not included in the total number of attacks on schools for this report, to avoid double counting.

In 2023, GCPEA identified at least 19 reports of attacks on schools.<sup>27</sup> Around half of reported incidents involved IEDs emplaced near schools; others included armed confrontations in the vicinity of schools, small arms fire, threats, and raids. Examples of IEDs reportedly installed near schools in 2023 included:

- Sometime before February 7, 2023, five explosive devices were reportedly installed near Cerezal School in Roberto Payán municipality, Nariño department, according to a local media outlet. The rural school offered classes to around 50 students. Colombian military forces reportedly located the explosive devices and performed a controlled detonation.<sup>28</sup>
- On July 29, 2023, a cylinder bomb was installed inside the Agricultural Technical Educational Institution of Suárez, María Inmaculada, in Suárez municipality, Cauca department, as reported by local media outlets.<sup>29</sup> Colombian authorities reportedly performed a controlled detonation, and the school was destroyed, according to international media outlet *Infobae*.<sup>30</sup>
- On September 20, 2023, a car bomb was detonated near a police station and the resulting blast destroyed several houses and impacted a nearby school in the Timba area of Buenos Aires municipality, Cauca department, as reported by international media outlet *France 24*.<sup>31</sup>

GCPEA also collected several reports of armed confrontations near schools or school infrastructure in 2023. For example:

- On February 6, 2023, an armed clash reportedly took place near a school in a rural area of El Bagre municipality, Antioquia department. As a result, parents and caregivers made the collective decision to keep children at home, meaning around 1,200 students did not attend class that day, as reported by local media *Semana* and *El Colombiano*.<sup>32</sup>
- On May 18, 2023, an armed clash reportedly took place near Los Nutabes Educational Center in El 15 area of Valdivia municipality, Antioquia department, while students were in class, according to a local media outlet.<sup>33</sup>
- On November 26, 2023, an armed clash reportedly took place near a school in Mosquera municipality, Cundinamarca department, causing damage to the school.<sup>34</sup>

## ATTACKS ON SCHOOL STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND OTHER EDUCATION PERSONNEL

During the 2022-2023 reporting period, GCPEA compiled around 61 reports of attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel. Killings and threats constituted the most commonly reported forms of attack and occurred across at least 20 departments, with Antioquia, Cauca, and Norte de Santander most affected. Non-state armed groups reportedly killed and threatened teachers for their involvement in teachers' unions, as occurred in the previous reporting period, as well as for their supposed support of rival armed groups.<sup>35</sup> Students and educators were also caught in the crossfire of armed clashes, threatened, or exposed to IEDs while on their way to or from school.<sup>36</sup> Reported attacks on school students and staff continued at a similar rate compared to the previous reporting period, when GCPEA identified around 24 reports in 2021 and more than 35 in 2020.<sup>37</sup>

In 2022, GCPEA collected approximately 27 reports of attacks on school students and education personnel, several of which targeted or otherwise impacted Indigenous teachers and students.<sup>38</sup> Separately, the UN verified 18 threats and attacks against students, teachers, or other protected persons in relation to schools.<sup>39</sup> Since some of the attacks may have overlapped with incidents collected by GCPEA, the incidents from the UN were not included in the total number of attacks on school students and staff, to avoid double counting. In addition, the Secretary of Education of Antioquia, according to local media outlet *El Colombiano*, reported that there were 400 cases of threats against teachers in the Bajo Cauca and northern areas of Antioquia department, mostly by armed groups, over an approximately 12-month period during 2022 and 2023.<sup>40</sup> However, it was unclear if all the threats were made by armed parties or otherwise met GCPEA criteria, so they were not included in the total number, to avoid double counting. Examples of incidents collected by GCPEA included:

- In early February 2022, an alleged armed group killed an Indigenous teacher and leader from the Wounaan community in Medio San Juan municipality, Chocó department, according to a local civil society organization.<sup>41</sup>
- On February 23, 2022, 16 students in a school bus on their way home from class, together with the driver and a staff member, were reportedly forced to disembark and the bus was set on fire in Paz de Ariporo

municipality, Casanare department. No one was harmed. According to a local media outlet, pamphlets had recently circulated in the area announcing a forced confinement for the community.<sup>42</sup>

- In late March and early April 2022, several Indigenous teachers received threats via phone calls and pamphlets in El Guamo municipality and nearby parts of Tolima department, as reported in local media outlets.<sup>43</sup>
- In mid-August 2022, more than 75 Indigenous teachers received threats for their supposed support for an armed group in the Huellas reservation, Caloto municipality, Cauca department, as reported by a local news outlet.<sup>44</sup>
- On August 29, 2022, an alleged armed group abducted five students from a rural school in Argelia municipality, Cauca department. Local media outlet *El Espectador* reported that an armed group claimed responsibility for the incident and that at least one of the students was abducted for his supposed support for a local drug trafficking group.<sup>45</sup>
- On September 2, 2022, near the Calima river, in Bajo Calima rural zone, Buenaventura municipality, Valle del Cauca department, the AGC and ELN reportedly engaged in combat and Indigenous Wounaan students in a school boat were caught in the crossfire. COALICO reported that the shootout occurred as students arrived from nearby communities to take university entrance exams the next day.<sup>46</sup>

In 2023, GCPEA collected approximately 34 reports of attacks on school students and education personnel.<sup>47</sup> Separately, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) reported 31 attacks on students and staff, including on their way to or from school, in 2023.<sup>48</sup> However, since it was unclear whether the incidents met GCPEA's criteria and since some incidents may have overlapped, they were not included in the total, to avoid double counting. Examples of incidents GCPEA identified included:

- In the period between roughly April 15 and May 15, 2023, an alleged armed group entered schools on multiple occasions to threaten and torture at least 20 teachers during their classes in Puerto Olaya area, Cimitarra municipality, Santander department, as reported by local media outlets. Schools reportedly shut for two weeks, with some teachers being transferred to work in schools elsewhere.<sup>49</sup>
- On May 2, 2023, several teachers received threats via pamphlets from an alleged armed group in Bolívar and Sucre departments, as reported by the Colombian Federation of Education Workers (FECODE) and local media outlet *Semana*.<sup>50</sup>
- On July 20, 2023, an alleged armed group entered a school in Uribe municipality, Meta department, and, after holding students hostage, abducted two teenage female students, as reported by the Ombudsman's Office and local media *El Universal*.<sup>51</sup>
- On September 12, 2023, a teacher was killed by an alleged armed group in front of students, their parents, and other school staff while he was handing back grades at a school in the Barro Blanco area of Yolombó municipality, Antioquia department, as reported by *El Tiempo* and *Infobae*.<sup>52</sup>
- On November 6, 2023, a group of Indigenous students, between the ages of six and eight, allegedly found an explosive device in a gravel pit while on their way home from school in Minitas Mirolindo reservation, Barrancominas municipality, Guainía department. The children played with the explosive device and brought it back to their community, where community leaders made the children set it aside, as reported by a local media outlet.<sup>53</sup>

## MILITARY USE OF SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES

In 2022 and 2023, GCPEA identified at least 40 reported incidents of military use of educational facilities, with Antioquia and Cauca departments most affected. The majority of incidents involved schools being used as fighting positions and bases. Military use of schools increased this reporting period as compared to the period covered by *Education under Attack 2022*, when GCPEA collected around three reports of military use in 2020 and 2021.<sup>54</sup>

In 2022, GCPEA identified at least 12 reports of military use.<sup>55</sup> Separately, the UN reported that ten schools were used by FARC dissidents, Colombian armed forces, AGC, ELN, and unidentified perpetrators, and that all were vacated.<sup>56</sup> However, to avoid double counting, they were not included in the total, since some may overlap with those counted by GCPEA. Examples of military use cases identified by GCPEA included:

- On May 3, 2022, FARC dissidents and another unidentified armed group reportedly entered a school in Gualpi area, Nariño department. Students later found the armed groups in the school.<sup>57</sup>
- In late May 2022, Colombian army brigade XXVII de Selva reportedly camped fewer than 200 meters from a school in San Salvador community, Puerto Asís municipality, Putumayo department, for several days and conducted patrols in the presence of students. A local civil society organization reported that community members asked the troops to move away from the school, since students were attending classes at the time, but the brigade remained.<sup>58</sup>
- On July 28, 2022, an armed group allegedly used a school as protection while engaging the Colombian army in combat in El Tambo municipality, Cauca department, as reported by a local media outlet citing a police commander.<sup>59</sup>
- In early November 2022, a school in Piedritas village, Tuluá municipality, Valle del Cauca department, was reportedly used as a firing position. International news outlet *El País* reported that students were still in the school at the time.<sup>60</sup>
- In late November 2022, Indigenous leaders protested the presence of an alleged armed group in schools and other communal and private buildings in the Chimborazo reservation, in Morales municipality, Cauca department, as reported by a local media outlet.<sup>61</sup>

In 2023, NRC reported 29 instances of military use and occupation of schools.<sup>62</sup> That same year, the UN reported 18 cases of military use, and that the schools were subsequently vacated.<sup>63</sup> Separately, GCPEA collected around 16 reports of military use.<sup>64</sup> However, to avoid double counting, the GCPEA incidents and UN count were not included in the total number of military use incidents for the report, since some may overlap with those in the NRC count. Examples of military use identified by GCPEA included:

- In early 2023, the Colombian army occupied a school for several days in Primavera community in a rural area of Buenaventura municipality, Valle del Cauca department, as reported by a local media outlet citing a regional Ombudsman's Office.<sup>65</sup>
- On February 6, 2023, an alleged armed group bound a person to a chair and killed them in front of a school in a rural area of El Bagre municipality, Antioquia department, according to local media outlet *El Colombi-*

ano citing a representative of the Ombudsperson's Office. The local news outlet reported that the school principal found the body when she arrived at work in the morning.<sup>66</sup>

- On April 26, 2023, an armed group allegedly used La Leona school as a defensive position while engaging the Colombian army in combat in a rural area of Argelia municipality, Cauca department. Students were in the school at the time, as reported by a local media outlet.<sup>67</sup>
- An armed group used schools for military purposes in Atrato subregion, Chocó department, as reported by the UN in November 2023. The schools served Afro-Colombian communities, and their occupation prevented students from accessing education.<sup>68</sup>

GCPEA also identified reports of schools being used for indoctrination and child recruitment in 2022 and 2023, as detailed below.

## CHILD RECRUITMENT AT, OR ON THE WAY TO OR FROM, SCHOOL

GCPEA identified at least 16 reports of child recruitment at, or on the way to or from, school during the 2022-2023 reporting period, with Antioquia and Cauca departments most affected. In comparison, two incidents of school-related child recruitment were identified in *Education under Attack 2022*, one each year in 2021 and 2020.<sup>69</sup>

In 2022, GCPEA identified reports of at least eight cases of child recruitment at, or on the way to or from, school.<sup>70</sup> For example:

- On March 10, 2022, at least two Indigenous students were recruited on their way to school in Caloto municipality, Cauca department, according to COALICO.<sup>71</sup>
- In mid-2022, several FARC dissident groups set up arms and gear displays next to schools in Cauca department and encouraged students to look at the military hardware with the intention of recruiting them, according to International Crisis Group. The international organization reported that teachers were intimidated into not raising concerns or forced to flee the area.<sup>72</sup>
- In early October 2022, twelve students were recruited from a secondary school in El Bagre municipality, Antioquia department, according to the Office of the Inspector General. Fear of recruitment was keeping some students from attending school in the area.<sup>73</sup>

In 2023, GCPEA identified at least eight reports of child recruitment at, or on the way to or from, school, several of which targeted or otherwise impacted Indigenous students.<sup>74</sup> For instance:

- In January and early February 2023, the Office of the Inspector General received reports of indoctrination and recruitment of students by FARC dissident forces in rural schools in Yarumal municipality, Antioquia department.<sup>75</sup>
- On April 21, 2023, at least four Indigenous students were recruited on their way to school in Inzá municipality, Cauca department, as reported by local media outlets.<sup>76</sup>
- On July 13, 2023, a girl student was recruited on her way to school in the Páez de Corinto Indigenous

community reservation, Corinto municipality, Cauca department, as reported by Indigenous authorities.<sup>77</sup>

In addition, local news outlets reported that, in mid-January and early February 2023, alleged armed group members wearing uniforms and bearing arms entered schools to distribute school supplies and play with the students in Campamento, San Pedro de los Milagros, and Yarumal municipalities in Antioquia department.<sup>78</sup> *Semana* reported that an alleged armed group encouraged students in the department to draw and color the armed group's emblem.<sup>79</sup>

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE AT, OR ON THE WAY TO OR FROM, SCHOOL

GCPEA identified one reported incident of sexual violence at, or on the way to or from, school during the 2022-2023 reporting period. *Education under Attack 2022*, which covered 2020 and 2021, reported two incidents of school-related sexual violence in Colombia.<sup>80</sup>

On June 3, 2023, members of an alleged armed group sexually abused a girl student after stopping and robbing a car of students and female teachers on their way to school in Maicao municipality, La Guajira department, as reported by a local media outlet.<sup>81</sup>

## ATTACKS ON HIGHER EDUCATION

GCPEA collected around 18 reports of attacks on higher education in 2022 and 2023. During the reporting period, police and the Mobile Anti-Riot Squadron (ESMAD) reportedly responded with excessive force to several on- and off-campus student protests over the conditions of university infrastructure and higher education funding. In addition, local media reported that alleged non-state armed groups attacked higher education facilities and threatened university students and professors. In comparison, GCPEA identified approximately four reports of attacks on higher education in 2021 and 15 in 2020.<sup>82</sup>

In 2022, GCPEA identified around 17 reports of attacks on higher education.<sup>83</sup> Examples of repression of education-related protests in 2022 included:

- On June 9, 2022, ESMAD reportedly entered Distrital University-La Macarena in Bogotá and used teargas, water cannons, and stun grenades to disperse student protests. The students demonstrated over the lack of water and other services at the university and to commemorate the "Day of the Fallen Student."<sup>84</sup>
- On October 5, 2022, ESMAD reportedly used water cannons to disperse students protesting near Córdoba University over inadequate university infrastructure and demanding the resignation of the dean in Montería city, Córdoba department. Local media outlet *Semana* reported that the students committed several acts of vandalism during the protests.<sup>85</sup>

Examples of reported attacks on higher education facilities and threats against students and academic staff in 2022 included:

- In the early hours of February 23, 2022, two explosive devices were reportedly planted in the street in front of the main entrance to the Francisco de Paula Santander University in Cúcuta city, Norte de Santander department. The incident reportedly occurred on the first day of a newly imposed curfew as part of a forced confinement in the area.<sup>86</sup>
- On May 6, 2022, a University of Antioquia bus was stopped and the four university employees on board were told to disembark before the bus was set on fire in Santa Fe de Antioquia municipality, Antioquia department. Local media outlet *Semana* reported that 34 other vehicles were set on fire that day as part of a forced confinement in the area.<sup>87</sup>
- In April and May 2022, students received death threats for their political activities at Valle University, in Cali city, Valle del Cauca department, as reported by Scholars at Risk and a local media outlet.<sup>88</sup>

In 2023, GCPEA identified one report of an attack on higher education. On July 26, 2023, ESMAD reportedly used teargas and stun grenades to disperse students protesting at the governor's office in Baranquilla city, Atlántico department, for free university tuition, as reported by local media outlets. International news outlet *Infobae* reported that police beat a student inside the building.<sup>89</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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