

# DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

GCPEA collected over 430 attacks on schools in 2022 and 2023, with North Kivu, Ituri, and Mai-Ndombe provinces particularly affected. In addition to attacks on schools, GCPEA collected reports of schools being used for military purposes, and armed groups recruiting students from schools or along school routes. Attacks on higher education students and staff also continued.

## CONTEXT

Armed conflict between non-state armed groups and Congolese national armed forces (Forces armées de la République Démocratique du Congo – FARDC), as well as intercommunal violence, increased in the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the 2022-2023 reporting period, especially in North Kivu province.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 120 armed groups were operating in Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu, and Tanganyika provinces, according to the Kivu Security Tracker.<sup>2</sup> Ahead of the presidential and parliamentary elections in December 2023, citizens encountered violence and discrimination at voting registration sites.<sup>3</sup>

Attacks conducted by the Rwandan-backed March 23 Movement (M23) armed group, which resumed military operations in 2021, increased during the reporting period.<sup>4</sup> In March 2022, renewed fighting between armed groups and the Congolese army escalated, and in May 2022, M23 fighters conducted the largest attack in a decade against the FARDC and seized territory in North Kivu province, on the Congolese-Rwandan border.<sup>5</sup> M23 fighters also committed sexual violence against women and girls, according to Human Rights Watch and news reports.<sup>6</sup> In March 2023, M23 and the FARDC agreed to a ceasefire, which generally held, despite sporadic violent events.<sup>7</sup> In North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri provinces, armed groups and government forces reportedly killed more than 2,440 civilians in 2022.<sup>8</sup> The UN verified that recruitment and use represented one-quarter of the almost 2,000 grave violations against children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the first six months of 2022, with a sharp increase reported in the first three months of the year.<sup>9</sup>

Intercommunal violence continued during the reporting period and increased in Kwamouth territory, Mai-Ndombe province, according to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.<sup>10</sup> At least 300 people were killed and more than 11,000 people were displaced in 2022 as a result of the ongoing violence.<sup>11</sup> During the clashes, civilian buildings, including schools, hospitals, and houses, were damaged and destroyed.<sup>12</sup>

More than 26 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance in 2023, including over 15 million children.<sup>13</sup> In late 2023, the UN reported that 6.5 million people were internally displaced in DRC, including 3.8 million children, with more than 2.9 million people newly displaced in 2023.<sup>14</sup> Armed groups attacked aid workers, particularly in eastern provinces, impacting access to humanitarian aid during the reporting period.<sup>15</sup> Conflict and insecurity continued to impact access to education during the reporting period. The UN reported in March 2023 that more than 2,100 schools closed due to insecurity in North Kivu and Ituri provinces, disrupt-

ing education for approximately 750,000 children.<sup>16</sup> In 2022, at least 60 schools were affected by violence in Rutshuru and Nyiragongo territories in North Kivu province.<sup>17</sup> In addition, schools were converted to shelters for internally displaced people in areas impacted by armed conflict and intercommunal violence.<sup>18</sup>

## ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS

GCPEA identified at least 430 attacks on schools during the 2022-2023 reporting period, most of which damaged or destroyed the school. This was lower than during the 2020-2021 reporting period, when over 600 attacks were reported.<sup>19</sup> By September 2023, over 700 schools were reportedly burned or destroyed since the resurgence of M23 violence in November 2021, although GCPEA was unable to establish how many of these attacks took place during the 2022-2023 reporting period.<sup>20</sup> GCPEA identified an increase in attacks involving the use of explosive weapons, with at least seven such attacks in 2022 and 2023, which injured or killed at least ten students.<sup>21</sup>

As a result of inter-community violence in Kwamouth territory, Mai-Ndombe province, 49 schools, including 31 primary schools, were destroyed between June 2022 and April 2023, according to the UN.<sup>22</sup> This violence spread to nearby provinces in 2023, including Kwilu, Kwango, and Kinshasa, according to Human Rights Watch,<sup>23</sup> and 202 schools were closed in May 2023 because of conflict in Tshangu district, Kinshasa province, as reported by Caritas.<sup>24</sup>

GCPEA identified at least 180 attacks on schools in 2022, primarily in Kasai Central, North Kivu, and Ituri provinces.<sup>25</sup> Separately, the UN verified 70 attacks on schools in 2022.<sup>26</sup> According to the DRC Education Cluster, over 550 schools were reportedly attacked, destroyed, burned down, or closed in 2022 due to generalized violence caused by armed group attacks.<sup>27</sup> Since it was unclear how many of the UN-verified attacks overlapped with reports collected by GCPEA, and since school closures due to generalized violence do not meet GCPEA's definition of an attack, these numbers were not included in the total number of attacks on schools in this report. Examples of attacks on schools identified by GCPEA included:

- On or around April 6, 2022, unidentified armed men reportedly set fire to a primary school in Malo-Tchengu, Irumu territory, Ituri province; classes for 320 children were suspended, according to ACLED and local media *Bunia Actualité*.<sup>28</sup>
- The UN reported that, on May 23, 2022, a rocket hit a school in Kanyagogo, Rutshuru territory, North Kivu province, destroying two classrooms.<sup>29</sup>
- On August 17, 2022, members of an armed group vandalized a primary school and a secondary school in Bijombo village, Uvira territory, South Kivu province, during an attack on the village, according to ACLED and international media outlet *Agenzia Fides*.<sup>30</sup>
- On November 11, 2022, members of an armed group reportedly looted the cafeteria of Kibumba Primary School in Bukumu, Nyiragongo territory, North Kivu province, according to ACLED and local media outlet *Radio Okapi*.<sup>31</sup>

GCPEA identified at least 270 attacks on schools in 2023, primarily in North Kivu and Ituri provinces.<sup>32</sup> Save

the Children reported that at least 150 schools in North Kivu province were attacked by armed groups between January and May 2023, affecting over 62,000 children.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, OCHA reported that, between January and March 2023, 97 schools were damaged or destroyed during attacks in Ituri province.<sup>34</sup> Examples of incidents identified by GCPEA included:

- Between February 8 and February 28, 2023, during clashes between the FARDC and M23 in Rutshuru territory, North Kivu province, at least two schools were looted, according to the UN.<sup>35</sup>
- In April 2023, suspected members of an armed group attacked and vandalized three schools in Djugu and Mahagi territories, Ituri province, as reported by the UN. In the context of increased violence in the two territories, 21 other schools suspended classes, impacting around 1,200 students.<sup>36</sup>
- On May 9, 2023, a grenade reportedly discarded by an unidentified armed group exploded and injured three students in a primary school in Aru town and district, Ituri province.<sup>37</sup>

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

In 2022 and 2023, GCPEA identified four attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel. Such incidents appeared to have decreased compared to the previous reporting period: GCPEA identified at least 11 incidents in 2021 and at least 13 in 2020, including a number of incidents involving the use of excessive force against student or teacher protestors.<sup>38</sup> The UN and the BBC reported that teachers closed at least 130 schools for two weeks in October and November, 2023, in Béni and Oïcha, North Kivu province, after three teachers and at least 12 students were killed in an attack, although GCPEA was unable to confirm whether the attack targeted students and teachers.<sup>39</sup>

GCPEA identified one attack in 2022: on November 5, 2022, an armed group allegedly abducted two teachers from a school in Kisimba, Walikale territory, North Kivu province, and shot one who attempted to escape, according to the UN.<sup>40</sup> This attack occurred in relation to an incident of child recruitment, detailed below.

GCPEA identified three attacks in 2023.<sup>41</sup> For example: on March 17, 2023, a headteacher was burned alive in Fakamba, Wamba Futundu district, Mai-Ndombe province, as reported by the UN.<sup>42</sup>

## MILITARY USE OF SCHOOLS OR UNIVERSITIES

GCPEA identified at least 41 cases of the military use of schools during the 2022-2023 reporting period. In comparison, GCPEA identified at least 25 such incidents in the previous reporting period.<sup>43</sup>

The UN reported that armed actors occupied 13 schools during 2022.<sup>44</sup> Separately, the DRC Protection Cluster reported that, in September 2022, the Uganda People's Defence Force stored ammunition at Lwanoli Primary School in Beni territory, North Kivu province, while the school was operational, putting students and teachers in danger.<sup>45</sup>

The UN reported that 41 schools were used for military purposes in 2023.<sup>46</sup> Separately, the DRC Protection Cluster reported 25 cases of military use in 2023, all in North Kivu,<sup>47</sup> although GCPEA was not able to determine whether these overlapped with the UN count, or whether they began in 2023 or earlier. Examples included:

- On May 15, 2023, members of an armed group occupied two schools in Muhangi, Lubero territory, North Kivu province, and used classroom tables and benches for firewood, as reported by the DRC Education Cluster.<sup>48</sup>
- The DRC Education Cluster reported that, on June 19, 2023, members of an armed group occupied a primary and a secondary school in Busenene, Rutshuru territory, North Kivu province, destroying the schools.<sup>49</sup>

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

Reports of sexual violence by warring parties at, or on the way to or from, school or university, continued to decrease in the 2022-2023 reporting period from a peak in the mid-2010s, although it is not clear whether this reflects a reduction in incidents, or in reporting. The UN verified 200 incidents of sexual violence against children in DRC in 2022,<sup>50</sup> although GCPEA could not determine whether any of these incidents took place at school or along school routes. In the previous reporting period, GCPEA identified one such incident in 2020.<sup>51</sup> In May 2023, students interviewed by the DRC Education Cluster in Kitshanga, Rutshuru territory, North Kivu province, reported that three girls had been raped on the way to school, although details about the perpetrator were not specified.<sup>52</sup>

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

GCPEA identified at least two incidents of child recruitment at, or on the way to or from, school, affecting at least 17 children, during the 2022-2023 reporting period. In comparison, during the previous reporting period at least 40 children were affected by school-related child recruitment.<sup>53</sup>

The UN verified 1,545 children as having been recruited in DRC in 2022, although GCPEA was unable to determine whether any of these incidents took place at, or on the way to or from, school.<sup>54</sup> The UN reported that, on November 5, 2022, an armed group recruited 15 students from a school in Kisimba, Walikale territory, North Kivu province.<sup>55</sup>

In May 2023, students interviewed by the DRC Education Cluster in Kitshanga town, Rutshuru territory, North Kivu province, reported that recruitment into armed groups was a danger at school and that a number of boys there had joined armed groups.<sup>56</sup>

At the start of the school year in September 2023, over 15,000 students did not return to school in Masisi, North Kivu province; local media reported that parents kept children at home because of fear that they would be recruited.<sup>57</sup>

## ATTACKS ON HIGHER EDUCATION

GCPEA identified 11 incidents of attacks on higher education during the 2022-2023 reporting period. This is a similar rate as compared to the prior reporting period, when GCPEA identified nine such incidents in 2021, and three in 2020.<sup>58</sup> Similar to previous years, incidents involved the use of excessive force against protesting students.

GCPEA identified nine incidents in 2022.<sup>59</sup> Examples included:

- On July 25, 2022, police allegedly fired guns to disperse a crowd of students protesting against university management and increased insecurity in Kalemie city, Tanganyika province; one student died, at least five suffered injuries, and two were arrested, as reported by ACLED and local media *Radio Okapi*.<sup>60</sup>
- On December 1, 2022, police reportedly shot at students from the University of Kisangani in Kisangani city, Tshopo province, who were protesting the university calendar, injuring at least six students, according to local media *Radio Okapi* and Scholars at Risk.<sup>61</sup>

GCPEA identified two attacks on higher education in 2023.<sup>62</sup> For example:

- On August 12, 2023, police allegedly used teargas to disperse students who were protesting in front of the University of Bunia in Bunia city, Ituri province, as reported by ACLED and local media *Radio Okapi*.<sup>63</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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