



Global Coalition to **Protect
Education from Attack**

Questions and Answers on the Safe Schools Declaration

What is the Safe Schools Declaration?

The [Safe Schools Declaration](#) is an inter-governmental political commitment – championed by Argentina and Norway – that provides countries the opportunity to express political support for the protection of students, teachers, schools, and universities during times of armed conflict. As of June 2023, [over 118 states](#) have joined the Declaration, including over half of the African Union and Organization of American States, and over two-thirds of the European Union, representing well over half of all United Nations member states.

Over the years, the Safe Schools Declaration has served as an effective tool for protecting students and educators from the attacks perpetrated by armed forces and groups. By joining the Declaration, states also commit to using the [Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict](#), a practical guide on how to reduce the military use of educational facilities.

Procedure for endorsement: The Government of Norway is the depositary of endorsements. States can announce their endorsement at any time by sending a letter to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs via its embassies or permanent missions or directly to: Seksjon.for.humanitaere.sporsmal@mfa.no.

What do countries that endorse the Declaration agree to do?

By joining the Declaration, states commit to undertake several common-sense steps to make it less likely that students, teachers, schools, and universities will be attacked, and to mitigate the negative consequences when such attacks occur. These measures include:

- Collecting reliable data on attacks and military use of schools and universities;
- Providing assistance to victims of attacks;
- Investigating allegations of violations of national and international law and prosecuting perpetrators where appropriate;
- Developing and promoting “conflict sensitive” approaches to education;
- Seeking to continue education during armed conflict;
- Supporting the UN’s work on the children and armed conflict agenda; and
- Using the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict* and bringing them into domestic policy and operational frameworks as far as possible and appropriate.
- Meeting on a regular basis to review progress made in implementing the Declaration.

What do the *Guidelines* say?

The *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict* urge parties to armed conflict (both state armed forces and non-state armed groups) not to use schools and



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universities for any purpose in support of the military effort. A core aim of the *Guidelines* is to protect against the risk of armed forces and groups converting schools and universities into military objectives by way of military use and exposing them to the potentially devastating consequences of attack. While it is acknowledged that certain uses would not be contrary to the law of armed conflict, all parties should endeavor to avoid impinging on students' safety and education, using the *Guidelines* as a guide to responsible practice.

How are schools and universities used for military purposes?

During armed conflicts, schools and universities are often used by armed forces and non-state armed groups as bases, barracks and temporary shelters, defensive and offensive positions or observation posts, weapons stores, and detention and interrogation centers. Classrooms, school grounds, and lecture halls are also used for military training and to forcibly recruit children into armed groups. Sometimes schools and universities are taken over entirely, and students are pushed out completely. At other times, education facilities are partially used for military purposes.

"It is a fitting moment to remind parties to conflict, whether armed forces or armed groups, that attacks on schools and their personnel must end, and be prevented. The military use of schools must stop. Children's rights to an education free from violence, benefitting boys and girls alike, must be upheld. I call on Member States and the international community to join forces to protect schools and to protect students and teachers from violence. And I reiterate that education is not only a fundamental right for children, but also the foundation for sustainable peace, stability and development."

Remarks by Special Representative to the Secretary General on Children And Armed Conflict, Ms. Virginia Gamba at Security Council Arrria formula meeting on the Protection of Education in Conflict, 06 December 2021

What are the *Guidelines* aiming to achieved?

The *Guidelines* are not intended to be legally binding, but they complement existing international humanitarian and human rights law. The *Guidelines* do not change the law – they merely facilitate compliance with the existing law by effecting a change in practice and behavior. They are intended to be used as a tool to raise awareness of the military use of schools among parties to armed conflict, and to facilitate discussions of the broader issues of protection and education in conflict among military forces, governments, and NGOs. It is hoped that the *Guidelines* will encourage a change in mentality and shift in behavior regarding the military use of schools and universities, through integration into military policies and doctrine, and application of good practice. The implementation of the *Guidelines* should be context-specific and tailored to individual states.

Did you know?

A "safe" school provides life-saving information, helps mitigate the psychosocial impact of war, contributes to gender equality, and can protect children from trafficking, sexual violence, and recruitment by armed groups. Disruptions in education can reduce the likelihood of children, in particular girls, returning to school, even when they are open and, in the long term, can impact individual earnings and a country's ability to



rebuild in the post-conflict period. Perhaps more important for a child, access to a safe space to learn offers a sense of normality, routine, and calm amid the chaos of war.

Why are students, teachers, schools, and universities being attacked?

Students, teachers, schools, and universities have been attacked by armed non-state groups and government armed forces for various purposes, including:

- To destroy symbols of government control or demonstrate control over an area by an anti-government group;
- To block the education of girls, or any type of education perceived to teach or impose alien religious or cultural values, biased history, or an unfamiliar language of instruction;
- To restrict teacher trade union activity and academic freedom;
- To abduct children for use as combatants, sex slaves or logistical support in military operations, or abduct students and teachers for ransom;
- Because the school or university was being used for military purposes by opposition forces; and
- Due to indiscriminate and/or disproportionate attacks.

International Committee of the Red Cross' [position](#):

The ICRC has stated that it: “welcomes the aim of the Safe Schools Declaration and the *Guidelines* to improve the protection of education in situations of armed conflict”. It sees the Declaration and the *Guidelines* as “useful reference documents in relation to the protection and continuity of education during armed conflict”. The ICRC has noted that the *Guidelines* are “not legally binding rules, and they do not purport to change existing international law”. It has added that it understands the *Guidelines* as “intended to lead to a shift of behaviour in practice that may result in a reduction in the military use of schools and universities” and has stated that “This endeavour is not at odds with International Humanitarian Law, even though the *Guidelines* recommend actions that go beyond what is required under IHL.” Additionally, the ICRC and IFRC [pledged](#) to “intensify, support and/or participate in efforts to ensure the continuity of education in contexts affected by armed conflicts, disasters and other emergencies, including, as appropriate, by supporting States to implement the Safe Schools Declaration and the *Guidelines*”.

What are the consequences when schools and universities are used for military purposes?

The presence of troops and weapons inside a school can turn the school into a target for attack by opposing forces. In addition to the risk of death or severe injury from attacks, students may be exposed to recruitment or sexual violence perpetrated by soldiers, they may witness violence, and their safety may be jeopardized by the presence of weapons or unexploded ordnance. All of these risks can have a significant psychological impact on students and teachers. The use of schools for military purposes can also result in infrastructure being damaged or destroyed and education materials lost, impacting the quality of education. The IASC Global Education Cluster estimated that the cost of repairing damage to schools from military use in South Sudan was approximately \$67,000 per school. The military use of schools can lead to lower rates of enrolment and transition to higher grades, and increased teacher



absenteeism. Students may drop out or experience interruptions to studies or may transfer to other schools, frequently resulting in overcrowding. Girls can be disproportionately affected as parents are often particularly wary of sending daughters to schools occupied by armed men.

The military use of schools can also have significant disadvantages for armed forces. Use of a school by military personnel is easily portrayed by the local community and the international community as abusive towards local children and education efforts. This, in turn, can be exploited by opposing forces within negative information operations. Moreover, in countries where the UN Security Council's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism has been established, groups that use schools for military purposes will have such use reported on in the UN Secretary-General's annual report to the Security Council on children and armed conflict, thus exposing the group to negative public attention, and the potential for further international response.

How are countries already implementing the Declaration?

Many states are already implementing the commitments in the Safe Schools Declaration, and this is having a positive effect. Recent examples include:

- Denmark,ⁱ Ecuador,ⁱⁱ New Zealand,ⁱⁱⁱ and Switzerland^{iv} have updated their military manuals including explicit protections for schools from military use. The United Kingdom^v and Norway^{vi} have updated their military policies to reflect their commitments. 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.^{vii}
- Drawing on the *Guidelines*, in September 2021, Nigeria released its [National Policy for Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools](#). In October 2021, the Nigerian Ministry of Defense, in collaboration with the Education in Emergencies Working Group, launched the Safe Schools Declaration Trainer's Guide and Participants' Manual for Nigerian Security Agencies and Human Rights Institutions.
- The Central African Republic established a Safe Schools Declaration follow-up committee in November 2021, to help the government implement the Declaration on the ground. CAR previously criminalized attacks on schools and their military use.
- In Mali in early 2019, the education ministry established a Technical Committee for operationalizing the Declaration. Seven sub-committees have since been established at local levels. In March 2020, the Technical Committee launched an Action Plan with concrete activities to disseminate the *Guidelines* and incorporate protection of schools and universities into national legislation. In May 2020, the Ministry of Education and the Technical Committee issued a letter to the Ministry of Defense asking them to respect the spirit of the *Guidelines* while schools were closed due to the pandemic, and not use schools for military purposes. Mali is also reportedly working on a draft law on Protecting Schools and Universities during the Armed Conflicts in Mali.



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- In 2017, 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*. UN DPO has subsequently released a range of training materials that reference the child protection policy and ban on military use of schools.
- The principles of the Declaration are included in the [AU Doctrine on Peace Support Operations](#), adopted in January 2021, which directly refers to the central commitment of the SSD, namely, to “ensure that schools are not attacked and used for military purposes”. In effect, this is a prohibition against using schools for military purposes by regional peacekeepers, and represents an important milestone that reflects the growing consensus within the African continent on the importance of protecting schools during armed conflict.
- On 29th October 2021, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted [Resolution 2601 \(2021\)](#) on the protection of education in conflict with 99 Member States joining as co-sponsors. Led by Norway and Niger, this is the first thematic resolution to mention the Safe Schools Declaration. The resolution reaffirms the contribution of education to peace and security and emphasizes its invaluable role in society, including as life-saving safe spaces; urges Member States to develop measures to prevent and address attacks; condemns the military use of schools in contravention of international law; and includes language on girls’ access to education.

For more examples of good practice, refer to the [Implementation Resource Bank](#) or the [Practical Impact of the Safe Schools Declaration](#).

Why is it important to work with non-state armed groups?

The Safe Schools Declaration is a political document through which states express support for the protection of education during armed conflict and formally endorse the *Guidelines*. The *Guidelines* themselves, however, are a practical tool that is available to all. They can be used by any interested actor outside the framework of the Safe Schools Declaration, for instance by non-state armed groups. The *Guidelines* apply to all parties fighting in armed conflicts and not just the armed forces of states. Many armed conflicts today are non-international (internal) and involve non-state armed groups. Consequently, it is vital for non-state armed groups to be familiar with the *Guidelines* and to integrate them into their military rules. Geneva Call, an organization that works with non-state armed groups to ensure their compliance with international humanitarian law, is already training such parties, including members of opposition groups in Syria, on how to implement protection for schools from attack and military use.

What is the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack?



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The [Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack](https://www.protectingeducation.org/) (GCPEA) was established in 2010 by organizations working in the fields of education in emergencies and conflict-affected fragile states, higher education, protection, and international human rights and humanitarian law, who were concerned about on-going attacks on educational institutions, their students, and staff in countries affected by conflict and insecurity. GCPEA is comprised of international organizations that include: Amnesty International, Education Above All through its program Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict, Human Rights Watch, Plan International, Save the Children, UNICEF, and UNESCO. GCPEA is a project of the Tides Center, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization.

Where can I get more information?

- A variety of resources on the Declaration and *Guidelines* are available on the website of the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, particularly on this page: www.protectingeducation.org/ssd
- A [framework for action](#) provides governments with suggestions, recommendations, and examples of good practice to assist them in implementing the Declaration,
- To facilitate gender-responsive implementation of the Declaration, GCPEA has produced a set of [recommendations for states](#) to consider when seeking to implement each commitment in a way that will better protect women and girls
- A [toolkit](#), produced through a partnership between GCPEA and the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, guides understanding and implementation of the Guidelines.
- A menu of actions provides [guidance to ministries](#) to assist their efforts to protect education from attack and schools and universities from military use.
- [Education under Attack 2022](#), GCPEA's flagship report, is a global study of attacks on schools, universities, their students and staff. The report shows over 5,000 incidents of attacks on schools, universities, students and education personnel, as well as cases of military use of schools and universities globally took place in 2020 and 2021, harming over 9,000 students and educators
- [Toolkit for Collecting and Analyzing Data on Attacks on Education](#), which offers guidance to help ensure that fewer attacks go unreported and more effective prevention and response plans can be developed.

¹ 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.

² Armed Forces of Ecuador, Manual of International Humanitarian Law, DBM-DOC-CC.FF.AA-05-2016, May 2016, Chapter VIII, sec. D.

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Ministry for 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.