

Safeguard Yemen's Future: Protect Education from Attack

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since it began in March 2015, the nearly four-year long armed conflict in Yemen has devastated the country's educational system. According to UNICEF and the Yemen Education Cluster, close to 500,000 children have dropped out of school since the conflict began, and around 4.7 million children are in need of educational assistance. The situation has been exacerbated by attacks on education, particularly airstrikes carried out by the Saudi-led coalition, ground fighting, and crossfire, which continue to pose grave risks to students and education staff and cause damage and destruction to schools and universities. To date, the Education Cluster reports that 256 schools have been destroyed and 1,520 damaged by armed conflict, and 23 are currently occupied by armed groups. Unpaid and insufficient teacher salaries are another serious challenge and have resulted in teachers striking and leaving the profession to find alternative employment. There are examples of schools that have remained open during teacher strikes apparently being threatened or attacked. University staff and students are being forced to seek exile abroad because of the physical destruction and political pressure, including demands that they align themselves politically and ideologically with parties to the conflict.

Yemeni government authorities in Aden have taken a positive step towards protecting education by endorsing the Safe Schools Declaration and by establishing a Safe Schools Committee within the Ministry of Education. But there is still much more to be done by all parties to the conflict and the international community to ensure that students, education personnel, schools and universities in Yemen remain safe and secure. On February 26, 2019, the United Nations and the Governments of Sweden and Switzerland will convene the third High-Level Pledging Conference to support the humanitarian response in Yemen. The Pledging Conference is an opportune moment for the international community to commit to providing assistance for safe and secure education in Yemen. The right to education cannot be safeguarded in Yemen without education itself being protected.

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OVERVIEW OF EDUCATION IN YEMEN

The ongoing armed conflict in Yemen has lasted almost four years, and the UN has called the current situation in Yemen the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The fighting has had a brutal impact on education.¹ By March 2018, UNICEF reported that nearly 500,000 children had dropped out of school since the start of the conflict.² Yemen's Education Cluster estimates that, as of the end of 2018, out of the 7.8 million children of school age, 4.7 million children are in need of educational assistance and 3.7 million are in acute need.³ Two million children are out of school, compared to 1.6 million before the conflict.⁴

According to the UN, international agencies, and the Education Cluster, the most pressing challenges to education currently include damage and destruction due to airstrikes and ground fighting, the use of schools for military purposes or to house internally displaced populations (IDPs), and teacher strikes because of currency devaluations or non-payment of salaries.⁵ According to the Education Cluster, 2,000 schools are currently out of use because of the conflict.⁶ Anecdotally, there are reports that, in some areas of the country, local militias or gangs in control of particular neighborhoods or districts restrict access to school for certain groups of children, such as girls, and that some teachers have either been forcibly recruited into armed groups or have chosen to join them because of the devaluation of their salaries.⁷ Moreover, 51 percent of teachers have not received their salaries since October 2016, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).⁸ Teacher strikes protesting non-payment of salaries have reportedly resulted in occasional attacks on education.⁹

The conflict has particularly damaged girls' access to education. According to Save the Children and the Education Cluster, families are especially likely to keep their girls home from school because of fears of sexual harassment and other forms of violence on the way to or from school, along with prioritizing boys' education, a lack of female teachers, lack of separated toilets.¹⁰ According to the Education Cluster, girls whose families have been displaced are least likely to go to school because of their families' limited resources, and girls who are out of school are more at risk of early marriage and domestic violence.¹¹

Beyond conflict-related insecurity, attacks on education have been a significant impediment to education. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack's (GCPEA) report, *Education under Attack 2018*, found that Yemen was among the nine countries most heavily affected by attacks on education between 2013 and 2017, with more than 1,500 schools and universities damaged, destroyed, or used for military purposes, according to UN and media sources.¹² From the start of the conflict in March 2015 until the middle of 2018, the UN verified 425 cases of attack on or military use of schools and hospitals.¹³ According to the Education Cluster, as of the beginning of 2019, 256 schools have been destroyed, 1,520 damaged, and 23 remain occupied by armed groups.

Attacks on education peaked during the first year of the conflict, with the UN verifying 92 attacks on schools in 2015.¹⁴ According to the UN's numbers, attacks on schools were slightly less common during subsequent years, but they continue to occur frequently. The UN verified 48 attacks on schools in 2016, and 20 in 2017.¹⁵ UN-verified numbers were unavailable for 2018 at the time of writing, but Yemen's Education Cluster estimates that there were 37 attacks on schools last year.¹⁶

Information collected by GCPEA from open and confidential, verified and unverified sources, similarly showed that attacks on students, education personnel, and educational facilities at all levels of the education system peaked in 2015, with over 300 attacks on education, compared to approximately 85 attacks in 2016, 102 in 2017, and 79 in 2018.¹⁷

Since 2015, attacks on education have affected access to school and university in several key ways. First, an intense air campaign by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition, in combination with ground fighting, has caused collateral damage to educational facilities. Although airstrikes reportedly caused the most damage to educational facilities in 2015, as described below, they remain the most common form of attack on education. Second, national armed forces and non-state armed groups have used dozens of schools for military purposes, sometimes resulting in attacks by opposing forces. Third, in some cases, armed groups have apparently targeted schools directly, for example, to enforce teacher strikes or to prevent girls and boys from attending mixed schools.

STUDENTS, EDUCATION PERSONNEL, AND EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE

Throughout the four-year conflict in Yemen, airstrikes carried out by the Saudi-led coalition have been the most prevalent risk to students, education personnel, and educational facilities, followed by ground strikes and crossfire. For example, the UN Secretary-General's Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict attributed 57 percent of attacks on schools in 2015 to the Saudi-led coalition, approximately 90 percent in 2016, and 95 percent in 2017.¹⁸ Human Rights Watch found that between 2015 and 2016, indiscriminate Saudi-led airstrikes caused 90 percent of the damage to, or the destruction of, schools in Sana'a, the capital.¹⁹

Educational facilities in Saada governorate, the Houthi's northern stronghold, have consistently experienced some of the highest numbers of airstrikes since 2015. Reports have indicated that between one-quarter to one-half of airstrikes have struck schools or universities in Saada governorate each year.²⁰ However, educational facilities in other governorates have also experienced frequent airstrikes as the primary battlefields have shifted across Yemen. For example, fighting surged in Hodeida governorate between June and December 2018, as Yemeni forces backed by Saudi Arabia sought to take control of the city from Houthi forces.²¹ During this time, at least eight schools, technical institutes, and universities were struck by airstrikes, according to several sources monitoring attacks on civilians.²²

Airstrikes have sometimes caused significant casualties among students and education personnel, as well as destruction to educational facilities. In a particularly devastating incident, the Saudi-led coalition struck a school bus in Saada governorate on August 9, 2018.²³ The attack occurred in the middle of a busy market, and the children—all boys—on the bus were reportedly part of a summer program that took place at the Grand Mosque. The day of the attack, they had gathered for a special excursion. The attack killed and maimed dozens of students and education personnel, although precise casualty estimates varied. According to the information verified by Civilian Impact Monitoring Project partners, 51 civilians, including 40 children were killed, and 79 civilians, including 56 children were injured.²⁴ According to Human Rights Watch, the attack killed at least 34 people, including three teachers and 25 children who were on the bus and a child and teacher who were in the market, in addition to wounding 13 children in the market and six children on the bus. Human Rights Watch called the attack an "apparent war crime."²⁵ The Saudi-led coalition later admitted that the airstrike was a mistake.²⁶

Other airstrikes have also caused devastation to students, education personnel, and educational facilities. For example:

- On August 13, 2016, an airstrike on a school in Haydan, Saada province, reportedly killed 10 students and injured 30 others, all between the ages of eight and 15.²⁷
- Human Rights Watch reported that on January 10, 2017, an airstrike near Al-Falah school in Nihm district, Sanaa governorate, killed two students and a school administrator, and injured three children when it struck an informal gas station located around 150 to 200 meters away.²⁸
- On January 13, 2018, an airstrike reportedly destroyed hundreds of books when it hit a school library.²⁹
- On April 11, 2018, two airstrikes killed a university guard when they struck the main building at a new university campus in Saada city.³⁰

In addition to being struck by airstrikes, students, education personnel, and educational facilities have also been hit by ground strikes, artillery, mortar, or gunfire. Information unverified by the UN, collated by GCPEA, indicates that this kind of crossfire has been responsible for approximately 20 attacks since January 2018. Since the beginning of 2018, these attacks have occurred most frequently in Taiz and Hodeida governorates, where some of the most significant fighting has occurred recently, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Events Data Project (ACLED).³¹

Attacks involving ground strikes or crossfire have included the following incidents:

- A mortar shell reportedly injured five students at a school in Na'man district, Al-Bayda governorate, on January 9, 2018.³²
- An 18-year-old woman was reportedly killed on February 4, 2018, when a mortar shell struck a school in Al-Qahirah district, Taiz governorate. The school was reportedly being used to shelter IDPs at the time.³³
- On November 18, 2018, six female students and one teacher were reportedly injured when unidentified gunmen attempted to assassinate the deputy commander of the Security Belt of Abyan governorate, a militia operating in southern Yemen, as he passed by Al-Fardous School in Enmaa, Aden. The gunmen missed the deputy commander and hit the school and schoolyard instead.³⁴
- On December 10, 2018, a number of civilians were reportedly injured in the area of Al-Hodeida University, when alleged pro-Houthi armed men indiscriminately opened fire in the vicinity.³⁵

MILITARY USE OF EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES

Armed forces and armed groups have used dozens of schools and universities for military purposes throughout the armed conflict in Yemen. Rates of military use apparently peaked in 2015, when the UN verified 84 cases of military use of educational facilities.³⁶ However, one to two dozen cases of military use have been documented each subsequent year.³⁷ According to UN-verified information, non-state armed groups, particularly Houthi forces, have been responsible for the majority of cases of military use during the conflict.³⁸

Examples of military use have included the following:

- On September 2, 2015, Houthi-affiliated fighters and forces loyal to the former president of Yemen took up fighting positions on the campus of Taiz University, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.³⁹
- *Education under Attack 2018* reported that an armed group was using part of a secondary school yard in Tawahi district, Aden in June 2017, and that the Yemeni army was using Omar bin Abdul Aziz school in Karesh, Lahj in August 2017.⁴⁰

In some cases, educational facilities being used for military purposes have subsequently been targeted for attack by opposing forces. For example, Human Rights Watch reported that Houthi-Saleh forces were housing fighters and had established an office in the al-Noor Center for the Care and Rehabilitation of the Blind, a boarding school for blind students in Sana'a, when it was struck by a Saudi-led coalition airstrike. Two school staff members, an 18-year-old student, and a local resident, were wounded. Although the bomb did not detonate, its impact broke windows and blew out doors in the school.⁴¹

TARGETING OF STUDENTS, EDUCATION STAFF, AND EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES TO ACHIEVE SOCIAL GOALS

Reports open and closed sources indicate that armed groups in Yemen have threatened and attacked students, education staff, and educational facilities in order to achieve social goals in several key ways. First, attacks on education have occurred in connection with educators' attempts to secure salary payments. Second, there are anecdotal reports indicating that some armed groups have targeted schools serving female students.

Contested Salaries

At present, lack of or insufficient teacher salaries are one of the most pressing challenges facing Yemen's educational system. Teachers and other education personnel in Yemen's 12 northern governorates, which are controlled by Houthi forces, have either not received their salaries at all for more than two years, or only partially received them.⁴² According to UNICEF, four million primary school students are at risk of losing their access to education primarily in the north because of the lack of teacher salaries.⁴³ Although teachers in the south have received salary payments, hyperinflation decreased the value of those salaries in the fall of 2018, and a nationwide teacher strike led 90 percent of public schools to remain closed at the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year.⁴⁴ Southern teachers returned to teaching in mid-October 2018, after receiving a salary increase, but the situation remains tenuous, and Save the Children has warned of the risk of another teachers' strike because of fluctuating currency exchange rates.⁴⁵

There is some evidence that teacher strikes have been connected to attacks on education. Anecdotally, armed groups have threatened schools that have opened during various strikes. For example:

- According to *Education under Attack 2018*, in October 2017, armed men attacked around half a dozen schools across Abyan, Aden, and Lahj governorates, in an attempt to force them to engage in a strike in demand for higher teacher salaries.⁴⁶
- In October 2018, the Education Cluster reported several security incidents against schools in Aden and Lahj governorates, and a media campaign targeting school principals who had chosen to keep their schools open during the strike.⁴⁷

A growing number of university faculty working in Houthi-controlled areas of the country have also reportedly been denied salaries, and, in some cases, replaced by educators who are affiliated with the Houthis.⁴⁸ For example, according to Scholars at Risk, when Sana'a University professors went on strike, protesting non-payment of salaries, Houthi forces fired and replaced them.⁴⁹ Moreover, Houthi forces reportedly arrested at least six Sana'a University professors on June 19, 2018, as they were traveling to Aden to receive their salaries from the internationally recognized government in Aden.⁵⁰ At the time of writing, there was no information on how long the professors were held.

Attacks Targeting Female Education

Armed groups have reportedly targeted female education in Yemen, in particular, although the extent of this is unclear based on the available evidence.⁵¹ Anecdotal cases include:

- In November 2017, principals and several district heads of education reported increased numbers of threats against schools on social media. For example, several schools had received WhatsApp messages threatening that they would be bombed if girls continued to attend school.⁵²
- On December 8, 2017, armed men reportedly threw a hand grenade at Shams Al-Naqib school in Al-Hawta city, Lahj governorate, and demanded the segregation of boys and girls.⁵³
- Unidentified gunmen threw a hand grenade at Bilqis school for girls in Hodeida city on July 21, 2018. The attack did not cause damage to the property or casualties.⁵⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS

Attacks on education in Yemen remain worryingly common. Airstrikes and ground fighting continue to kill and maim students and education personnel, and harm educational facilities.

By endorsing the Safe Schools Declaration, Yemeni government authorities in Aden have taken an important step towards protecting education. While the authorities have acted to implement the Declaration, including by establishing a Safe Schools Committee within the Ministry of Education, implementation of the Declaration should be continued, strengthened, and supported, taking into account the particular ways in which women and girls are uniquely impacted by attacks on education.⁵⁵ Houthi authorities in Sana'a, along with all other parties to the conflict, should also take action to protect students, education personnel, schools, and universities.

In particular, GCPEA makes the following recommendations to better protect education and ensure continued access to safe and quality education in Yemen:

To the international and donor community:

- Cease the direct or indirect supply of weapons, munitions, military equipment or technology, or logistical and financial support for such supplies, that support the military operations of any party to the conflict in Yemen, as long as substantial risk remains that such arms would be used to commit serious violations of international humanitarian law or international human rights law, including attacks on education.
- Strengthen the capacity and resources of monitoring partners, including UNICEF-led Country Taskforce on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR) and the Education Cluster, to investigate cases of attacks on education and military use of schools and universities more quickly and efficiently.
- Encourage grantees to report attacks on education and military use of schools and universities to the CTFMR, the Education Cluster, and other monitoring partners.
- Support and provide financial assistance to education authorities throughout the country to prevent, mitigate, and respond to attacks on education by collaborating with local civil society and community members to develop early warning systems, contingency plans, comprehensive safety and security plans, as well as other initiatives to prevent and mitigate the impact of attacks on education at the school and university levels, ensuring that these measures respond to the specific needs and experiences of males and females and vulnerable groups, such as displaced children.
- Support and fund the establishment of safe spaces, such as temporary learning spaces, formal or informal community centers, or women's centers, where victims of attacks on education can receive legal, medical, and psychosocial information and services; learn of opportunities to continue their education during the conflict; and participate in developing and contributing to response and protection measures.
- Provide funding to reconstruct or rehabilitate educational facilities that have been damaged or destroyed by armed conflict and build education information systems.
- Support the investigations by the Group of International and Regional Eminent Experts on Yemen and the UN Security Council's Sanctions Committee Panel of Experts of any potential violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law that may occur, including attacks on education and military use of schools and universities.
- Support Yemen's economy, the stabilization of the Yemeni rial, and the Central Bank of Yemen to address Yemen's public sector salary crisis, especially for educators, in the long-term. In the interim, support the payment of incentives to encourage educators to remain in their posts (as estimated in the 2019 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan (YHRP), the existing financial gap is \$34.7 million, with a financial requirement of \$105.4 million).⁵⁶

To all parties to the conflict:

- Cease deliberate or indiscriminate attacks on educational institutions, and take all feasible precautions when attacking legitimate military targets near schools or universities.
- Refrain from using schools and universities for military purposes, including by integrating the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict* into domestic policy, operational frameworks, and training manuals, as far as is possible and appropriate. Ensure that placement of armed security and defense personnel are not co-located with schools.
- Remove any military personnel currently stationed in schools, universities, or other educational institutions from those facilities.

To the authorities in Sana'a and Aden:

- Strengthen existing monitoring and reporting mechanisms by providing safe access for agencies reporting attacks on education, including the UNICEF-led CTFMR and the Education Cluster, to investigate cases of attacks on education and military use of schools and universities more quickly and efficiently.
- Ensure schools remain open and operational, and that safe education continues despite the armed conflict by collaborating with local civil society and community members to develop early warning systems, contingency plans, and comprehensive safety and security plans, as well as other initiatives to identify, prevent, and mitigate the impact of attacks on education at the school and university levels, and ensure that these measures respond to the specific needs and experiences of males and females and vulnerable groups.
- Ensure the payment of salaries to and strengthen the capacity of teachers, education support staff, and education officials throughout the country; provide learning materials and programs to school-aged children, especially for those in the most deprived situations.

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹¹ OCHA, *2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview*, p. 17.
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- ¹⁵ United Nations General Assembly and Security Council, "Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General," A/72/865-S/2018/465, May 16, 2018, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2018/465&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC (accessed January 9, 2019), paras. 207-208.
- ¹⁶ OCHA, *2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview*, p. 17.

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