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Attacking Education a War Tactic Globally, Study Shows

(New York, February 27, 2014) – Schools and universities, as well as students, teachers, and academics are intentionally targeted for attack in conflicts worldwide, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack said in a 250-page study released today. "Education Under Attack 2014" identifies 70 countries where attacks occurred between 2009 and 2013, including 30 where there was a pattern of deliberate attacks (see map).

"Schools, students, and staff are not just caught in the crossfire, but are all too often the targets of attacks," said Diya Nijhowne, director at the Global Coalition. "They are bombed, burned, shot, threatened, and abducted precisely because of their connection to education. They are soft, easy targets, and governments and armed groups need to protect them from being used as a tactic of war."

Both armed non-state groups and national military and security forces are attacking education to advance their own interests, the Global Coalition said. They may be retaliating against a community's perceived support for the opposition; seeking to demonstrate a lack of government control by harming schools and teachers, symbols of the state; attacking forces based in or using a school building; or opposing the spread of ideas deemed to be objectionable, such as the education of girls.

Often, sectarian violence is fought out in the schoolyard. In March 2013, a mob of 200 Buddhist nationalists torched a Muslim school in Meiktila, Myanmar, clubbing students, setting them on fire, and decapitating one. In total, 32 students and four teachers were killed.

"Attacks on education in the last five years have killed hundreds of students, teachers, and academics, and injured many more," Nijhowne said. "Hundreds of thousands of students have been denied the right to an education when their schools and universities have been intentionally damaged or destroyed or used for military purposes."

In 24 of the 30 countries profiled in the study (see map), warring parties took over schools in whole or part, using them as bases, barracks, firing positions, and weapons caches. In Syria, 1,000 schools have allegedly been used as detention or torture centers. Buildings that should have been safe spaces for learning became actual battlefields when military use made them a target for attack.

In Somalia, where armed militants fought government forces from bases in schools, one boy recalled a terrifying incident during class in 2010: "The school was hit by a weapon that sounded like thunder when coming and then made a big explosion." Three children died in that attack and six were injured.

In ideological rifts turned violent, education can be a primary target. In July 2013, gunmen attacked a boarding school dormitory in northern Nigeria, setting it on fire at night while students were sleeping and shooting many who tried to escape. At least 22 students and one teacher were killed. In a video statement released shortly afterward, Abubakar Shekau, leader of the militant Islamist group Boko Haram, endorsed attacks on schools and said: "School teachers who are teaching Western education? We will kill them! We will kill them!" The government's response in many instances has been to close schools, sometimes for months, effectively blocking access to education.

The Global Coalition also examined assaults on higher education, which have been monitored less than attacks on elementary and secondary schools. Colleges, universities, and individual students and academics were attacked in 28 of the profiled countries (see map). In some instances, the aim was to extinguish new ideas and innovation. In Mexico, a group opposed to nanotechnology claimed responsibility for seven bombings of university campuses and research laboratories and the assassination of one researcher. In other instances, the aim was to prevent the growth of opposition movements, restrict political protests, or curtail discussion of sensitive topics. In Iraq in the past five years, 26 academics were reportedly killed. Last year, the president of Diyala University survived an assassination attempt that killed two of his bodyguards.

Between 2009 and 2012, the Global Coalition found, students and educators were most at risk in 13 heavily or very heavily affected countries (Afghanistan, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Libya, Mexico, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen). In each country there were reports of at least 500 incidents of attacks or military use of education buildings, or 500 education-related victims, and at the higher end, more than 1000.

In compiling the data, the Global Coalition relied mainly on information provided by the United Nations, respected human rights organizations, and the media. The Global Coalition also interviewed country experts and commissioned some research locally. "Education under Attack 2014" follows two reports by UNESCO, in 2007 and 2010.

The Global Coalition also explored ways of protecting education. These include investigating attacks and prosecuting perpetrators; negotiating with belligerent parties to respect schools as safe zones; ending the use of schools and teachers for electoral tasks in conflict areas; ensuring equitable access of different identity groups to education; and improving curricula to address perceptions that education is biased and to build respect for diversity.

In particular, the Global Coalition called for widespread adoption of the "Lucens Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict." The Guidelines draw on international human rights and humanitarian law as well as good practice to preserve education as a safe zone in armed conflicts.

The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) is a coalition of organizations that include: the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA), Human Rights Watch, the Institute of International Education/IIE's Scholar Rescue Fund, Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict, Save the Children, the Scholars at Risk Network, UNESCO, UNHCR and UNICEF. GCPEA is a project of the Tides Center, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization.

The study is available at:
http://www.protectingeducation.org/education-under-attack-2014

The following materials are available at:
http://www.protectingeducation.org/user/login?destination=secure/education-under-attack-2014
Login information:
Username: GCPEA Secure
Password: Pr3v1ew8a#

- "Education Under Attack" [video]
- Maps of Education Under Attack
- Key Facts and Findings from the Study
- Frequently Asked Questions about the Study
- A Summary of Education Under Attack 2014
- Photographs

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