Education under attack

A global study on targeted political and military violence against education staff, students, teachers, union and government officials, and educational institutions

The study is dedicated to the life of Safia Ama Jan, a champion of efforts to get Afghan girls into school, who was shot and killed outside her home in Kandahar in September 2006. Its purpose is to raise awareness and understanding of the extent to which those involved in education, whether students, teaching staff, trade unionists, administrators or officials, are facing violent political and military attacks, and to suggest paths of action to address the problem.

Scale of attacks
The number of reported targeted attacks on students and educational, staff and institutions appears to have risen dramatically in the past three years. But the number of incidents may simply reflect fluctuating levels of conflict and the pattern of unreported incidents may differ.

Incidents include the bombing, assassination, abduction, illegal detention and torture of staff, students, education officials and trade unionists, the bombing and burning of educational buildings, and the closure of institutions by force. They also include the forced recruitment of child soldiers and the enlistment of children under 15, as well as the threat of any of the above.

The report says: 'The dramatic increase of attacks on education staff, students and institutions over the past three years, and subsequent loss of life, result from an abhorrent tactic of sacrificing the lives of innocent young people, and those who are guilty of nothing worse than trying to help them develop their potential for the sake of political or ideological aims. They also have a devastating impact on the provision of education in the most-affected countries.'

The attacks tend to be carried out by subversive, separatist or sectarian armed groups on the one hand, or paramilitary forces supported by the state, state security forces or occupying forces on the other.

Some of the countries with the highest number of attacks on education targets in recent years are:

Afghanistan: 62 bombing, arson and missile attacks against education targets in 2005 and 88 in 2006, plus 37 threatened attacks.

Colombia: 310 teachers were murdered between 2000 and 2006, and 11,000 children aged 7 to13 were combatants in 2003.

Iraq: 280 academics have been killed since the fall of Saddam Hussein, 296 members of education staff were killed in 2005, and 180 teachers were killed between February and November 2006.

Myanmar: In 2002 an estimated 70,000 child soldiers were enlisted, many of them in the national army, some forcibly recruited as young as 11.

Nepal: Between 2002 and 2006 some 10,600 teachers and 22,000 students were abducted by Maoists, 734 teachers and 1,730 students were arrested or tortured, and 79 schools and 1 university were destroyed.

Thailand: 71 teachers were killed and 130 schools burned down in 2004-2006.

The nature of attacks
The types of attack carried out vary from sophisticated military-style operations such as the Beslan school hostage tragedy to multiple bomb blasts that have killed dozens of students in a single incident in Baghdad; the assassination of teachers in school; the abduction of thousands of children to work as child soldiers; the blasting of schools with shells and rockets by occupying forces and their use as military bases; individual acts of savagery such as the rape of a Baghdad teacher whose body was mutilated, strung up outside her school and left hanging there for days, or the shooting and burning of a Thai teacher in front of terrified staff and students; and the silent sinister disappearance of teacher trade unionists in Colombia.

Motives
The motives for attacks vary between conflicts and within conflicts, and can be multilayered. For instance, the attacks on girls' schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan by extremist Islamic groups thought to be allied to Al Qaeda or the Taliban may be rooted in an ideological belief that the education of girls should be forbidden. But they may also be designed to spread fear and instability, and undermine the authority of the state. In Thailand armed groups are motivated by a desire for varying degrees of autonomy or separatism. Teachers may be singled out for assassination because they are charged with inculcating children with Buddhist-Thai culture, which Muslim separatists oppose, or simply because among all the symbols of state control, they are soft targets.

In Iraq where armed groups have conflicting aims, academics may be targeted because they are seen as collaborators with Saddam Hussein's regime, or by Baathists for the opposite reason; or because the university is located in a Shia or a Sunni area; or because some armed groups are intent on liquidating the intellectual leadership of the country in preparation for imposing a theocracy.

Impact on education provision
In the worst-affected countries, the impact of violent attacks on education provision is devastating.

Given that up to 40 per cent of the 77 million children in the world who are not attending school can be found in conflict or post-conflict countries, understanding the impact of attacks on education is crucial to attempts to achieve Education for All worldwide.

The most-affected country currently is Iraq where the scale of incidents and deaths have reached a tipping point that threatens the collapse of the school and university systems.

Only 30 per cent of Iraq's 3.5 million students are attending classes, compared to 75 per cent in the previous school year. Baghdad universities are reporting attendance down by 40 per

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cent, in some departments attendance is down to one-third. More than 3,000 academics have fled the country.

Preventive measures

Traditional responses include providing armed guards and armed escorts for transport to schools, giving weapons training to teachers, or sending in extra troops to the area to counter general violence.

In Afghanistan, **alternative approaches** being developed include monitoring threats and mobilizing local communities to confront attackers, and regrouping classes inside villagers' houses, out of sight of attackers.

In Iraq, academic researchers are being encouraged to work from home. Ways of using distance learning by television and radio are being explored.

Internationally, **human rights instruments** are being used to press for an end to the torture and illegal detention of teachers and students, and the recruitment of child soldiers. Current investigations by the International Criminal Court involve attacks on educational institutions, which are a war crime. But more needs to be done to embed protection for teachers and academics within human rights law by focusing instruments on protection for schools and universities, and the education process.

Towards safe sanctuaries

One obstacle to preventing attacks is the perception by parties in conflicts that education is not neutral. Experts agree that far greater attention should be paid to recognizing how education can be a factor in tension and conflict, particularly if good quality education is denied to particular groups or education appears to impose an alien culture in a particular region. Schools with no walls; dilapidated buildings; lack of textbooks; exclusion of minorities; hate curricula; tuition in an alien language; denial of teaching about local or minority beliefs, culture and history; parallel systems and inequality of resources; sectarian appointments; and lack of transparency in the running of institutions may be underlying reasons why armed groups are prepared to target places of learning as part of a broader struggle. In some situations compromises on these issues could ease wider tension. Emergency interventions have already shown how education can aid stabilization in post-conflict situations. The challenge now in conflict-affected countries is to create student-friendly, inclusive schools and universities, free of sectarianism and political interference, giving all sides a stake in their protection. They can then become safe sanctuaries or zones of peace, promoting tolerance and understanding, reducing tension and aiding efforts to resolve the wider conflict.

Conclusions and recommendations

The report concludes by acknowledging that there has been a noticeable increase in targeted attacks on education staff, students and institutions in a number of countries and that this constitutes a highly damaging assault on the provision and availability of education in the countries most affected.

The report proceeds to present a number of recommendations arising from its findings and analysis, including the following:

- If the international community is serious about attempts to achieve Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals on education, it needs to focus attention urgently on

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the impact of violent attacks on education and press for an end to impunity for such attacks.

- Current international monitoring of incidents is limited and the report recommends the establishment of a publicly accessible global database to facilitate the examination of trends in the scale, nature and targeting of attacks, and qualitative research into the underlying motives.

- There is an urgent need to widen the application of human rights instruments to violations regarding students, teachers, academics, and education trade unionists and officials, and for governments and intergovernmental bodies to set conditions of adherence to the instruments when negotiating trade or aid packages with offending parties. These conditions should include an end to impunity for attacks on education staff and institutions, comprising *inter alia* the illegal detention, torture or assassination of trade unionists.

- Recent international efforts to press for action on the issue of recruitment of child soldiers should be extended to attacks on schools, universities and education offices, and the protection of the education process, with the aim of making schools and universities safe sanctuaries, free from military and political violence.

- Greater resources should be given to the International Criminal Court to bring more education-related cases to trial to widen the Court's deterrent effect.

- Action should be taken urgently to encourage the removal of education as a factor contributing to conflicts and make it part of the solution. This means creating child-friendly inclusive schools that are sensitive to local culture and language, and that teach and operate within an ethos of peace and tolerance. It also means pressing for transparency and an end to political and sectarian interference in the running of universities and a commitment to academic freedom and autonomy.