Supporting Safe Education in the Central Sahel

Briefing Paper | September 2020

A school in northern Burkina Faso is abandoned after an attack by an armed group.
© 2019 (Philip Kleinfeld/TNH)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Central Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali are confronting unprecedented levels of conflict, displacement, and humanitarian needs exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.[1]

This complex humanitarian crisis has severely impacted education. Prior to national Covid-19 lockdowns, insecurity and direct attacks on school infrastructure and staff forced around 4,000 schools in the Central Sahel to close by early 2020,[2] affecting 650,000 students, according to the United Nations (UN).[3]

The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) found that reported attacks on education by armed groups operating across the borders of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are rising. According to GCPEA's *Education under Attack* 2020 report, over 430 attacks on education occurred in the Central Sahel between 2015 and 2019.[4] Between January and July 2020 alone, GCPEA identified over 90 reported attacks on education in the region, despite challenges to monitoring and reporting during the pandemic. As classes resume after Covid-19 related closures, schools, universities, students, and education personnel in the region are likely to face increased risks, based on an analysis of emerging data from 2020 and previous years.

Attacks on education have had reverberating effects across the region. In addition to causing injury and the loss of life, attacks undermine access to quality education, prevent the realization of other fundamental rights, and have lasting effects on peace and development and the attainment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Global Coalition to
Protect Education from Attack

GCPEA

www.protectingeducation.org

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ahead of the Ministerial Roundtable on the Central Sahel in October 2020, GCPEA recommends the following to governments, donors, and humanitarian and development actors:

– Prioritize and fund measures to prevent, mitigate, and respond to attacks on education such as the development of risk assessments, education continuity plans, and comprehensive safety and security plans, withinhumanitarian response and development plans and programs;

– Strengthen and support the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration to better protect the civilian character of schools and universities and cease attacks and threats of attacks against students, teachers, and educational facilities in the region, including by implementing the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict*;

– Encourage strong regional cooperation and peer-to-peer exchange of good practices and lessons learned in implementing the Safe Schools Declaration, and enhance regional efforts to monitor and report on attacks on education and military use of schools.

To support schools re-opening and education continuing safely in the Central Sahel, governments, donors, and humanitarian and development actors should do the following to integrate the Safe Schools Declaration into planning processes:

– Develop and implement gender-responsive risk assessments and school security and response plans to prevent and mitigate the impact of attacks on education before and during, and after the reopening of schools and universities;

– Ensure that teachers and administrators are not pressured to reopen schools and universities in insecure areas unless appropriate security measures are in place and employ alternative or distance learning measures where schools cannot safely reopen;

– Ensure that any post-Covid-19 "back-to-school" campaigns and catch-up classes are inclusive of learners who previously ended their studies due to attacks on schools, insecurity, or displacement; continue to expand distance-learning programs established in response to Covid-19 to benefit these learners.

To protect education from attack before, during, and beyond the re-opening of schools, governments, donors, and humanitarian and development actors should:

– Continue to monitor attacks on education and military use even while schools are closed due to Covid-19 restrictions or insecurity when it is possible to ensure the health and safety of monitors; timely monitoring and reporting will support the development of prevention and response plans and help to ensure no teachers or learners are left behind;

– Refrain from using schools and universities for military purposes at all times. Vacate schools occupied during the pandemic, make repairs, and conduct risk assessments to ensure that safe education can occur upon reopening, following the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict*. Implement laws, policies, and trainings to discourage the military use of schools and universities by armed forces and armed groups;

– Ensure accountability and redress for attacks on education, including by investigating allegations of violations of applicable national and international law and duly prosecuting perpetrators;

– Prioritize the rebuilding and rehabilitation of damaged or destroyed schools and universities;

– Where feasible, disaggregate data collection and reporting by gender so that prevention and response plans can best take into account the unique needs of girls and women, as well as boys and men.
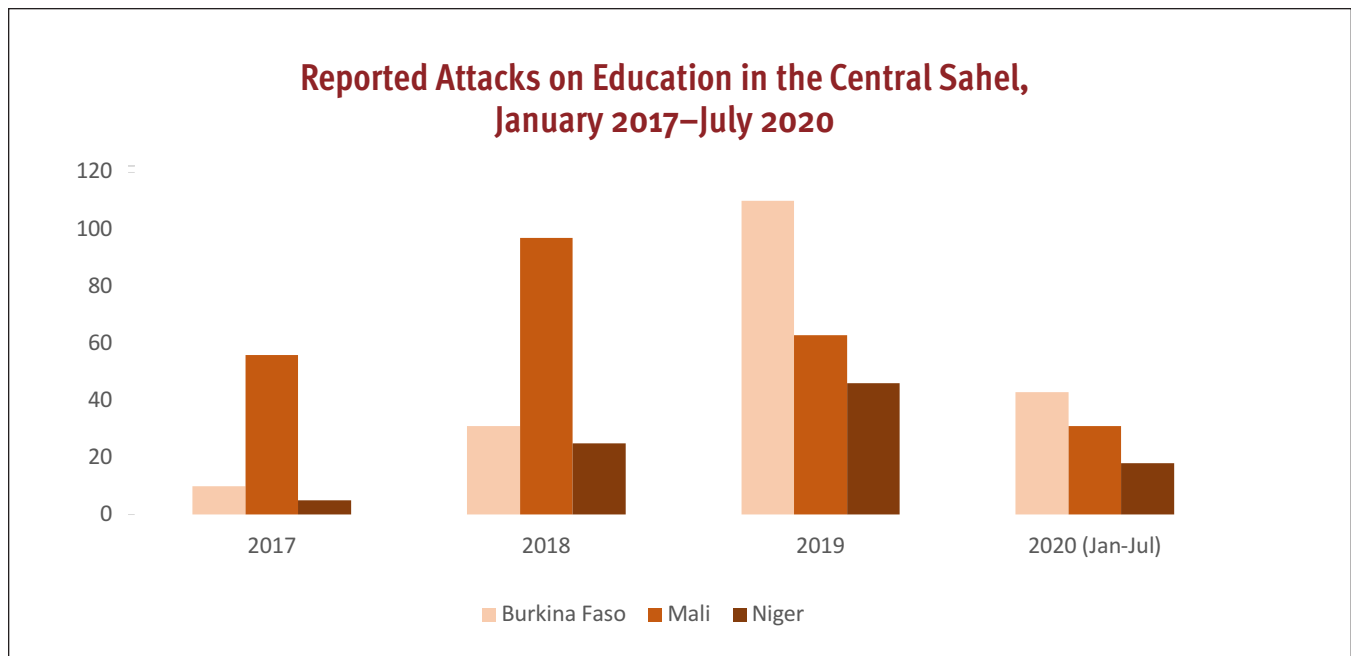
ATTACKS ON EDUCATION IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

GCPEA has identified an alarming number of attacks on education in the Central Sahel over recent years. Between 2015 and 2019, GCPEA collected over 430 reported incidents of attacks on education in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.

According to GCPEA's *Education under Attack 2020* report, in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, armed groups who oppose state-administered, French-language education explicitly targeted government schools, most commonly by burning and looting educational facilities and threatening, abducting, or killing teachers. In Burkina Faso, Human Rights Watch found that attacks often occurred when students were in class, but that students were not typically the targets.[5]

Though perpetrators of these attacks on education rarely claim responsibility, affiliates of armed groups such as the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Ansarul Islam committed violence against civilians and civilian infrastructure in the region.[6]

State forces and non-state armed groups also used dozens of schools for military purposes, including as campgrounds and temporary bases in the region, according to GCPEA research.

Reported Attacks on Education in the Central Sahel, January 2017–July 2020

Starting in 2017, the Central Sahel countries experienced a spike in reported attacks on schools and school personnel. GCPEA collected ten reported incidents of attacks on education in Burkina Faso in 2017, but identified over 30 attacks on education in 2018 and more than 100 reported attacks in 2019.[7] In Niger, reports of attacks on education nearly doubled between 2018 and 2019, and shifted geographically from the eastern Lake Chad basin to western Tillabéri and Tahoua regions at the borders of Mali and Burkina Faso.[8] Finally, although Mali experienced a slight decline in attacks on schools and school personnel between 2018 and 2019, attacks were overall up compared to 2017.

ATTACKS ON EDUCATION IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL: JANUARY – JULY 2020

Reports indicated that attacks on education continued in 2020, despite school closures between late March and May due to Covid-19. Over 90 incidents of attacks on education occurred in the first 7 months of 2020, appearing to occur at a similar rate to the previous year, according to GCPEA data. Burkina Faso experienced the highest number of reported attacks on education in the region in the first seven months of 2020, with over 40 reported incidents, including the arson and looting of schools and abduction, threats, or killing of teachers; of these incidents, nearly half took place in June and July. In Mali, GCPEA identified 31 reported incidents of attacks on education in 2020, 27 of which occurred in June when schools reopened for exams. In June, the Education Cluster also collected reports of almost 500 threats made against teachers and schools in Mali.[9] In Niger, GCPEA identified 15 reported attacks on education between January and March 2020, and only two reported incidents in May and June 2020.

Though reporting declined between March and May 2020 when schools were closed due to Covid-19, GCPEA identified a number of incidents that occurred during that period:

— In Ouagadugou, Burkina Faso, law enforcement used excessive force against university students who had allegedly violated a curfew imposed due to Covid-19 at a campus residence on March 31, 2020, according to local media.[10]

— On April 29, 2020, armed men allegedly killed a civilian school guard and burned two schools in Tapoa district, Est province, Burkina Faso, according to local media.[11]

— On May 4, 2020, local media reported that unidentified armed assailants allegedly burned a primary school and its director's home in Tapoa district, Est province, Burkina Faso.[12]

— Around May 13, 2020, members of an armed group allegedly burned a school in Bolsi, Torodi district, Tillabéri region, Niger, after preaching to community members, as reported by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED).[13]

GCPEA did not identify any incidents of military use of schools or universities in the Central Sahel during the first half of 2020. However, this may be due to gaps in monitoring and reporting that occurred during Covid-19 lockdowns.

Although gender disaggregated data on attacks on education was not widely available for the region, GCPEA research has found that attacks on education, including sexual violence, often have differentiated impacts on women and girls, including forced marriage, forced pregnancy due to rape and premature pregnancy, and stigma which reduce the likelihood of girls returning to school after an attack.

A student writes on the blackboard of a temporary learning space in
a camp for internally displaced people in Mopti, Mali, in April 2019.
© UNICEF/UN0313366/Dicko

Challenges to monitoring and reporting due to Covid-19

Heightened insecurity, reduced field capacity due to public health measures, and school closures may have caused delays or gaps in monitoring and reporting of attacks on education.[14] This may partly explain the relative reduction in numbers of incidents reported in April and May 2020. In addition, since armed groups in the Central Sahel region frequently target teachers while at work and burn and loot schools to discourage attendance, their disuse during Covid-19 may have weakened their utility as targets in conflict, also potentially explaining the lower numbers of reported attacks.

As monitoring and reporting resumes in the region, GCPEA anticipates increased recording and verification of attacks on education and military use of schools, including retroactive reporting of incidents which may have occurred during Covid-19 closures. The actual numbers of attacks on schools are likely higher than those reported in this briefing.

RESURGING ATTACKS AS SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES REOPEN

Emerging evidence suggests that attacks resumed as schools began to reopen in the Central Sahel. For example, in Niger, the UN reported that armed group members threatened two secondary schools in Tillabéri region only two weeks after schools reopened on June 1, 2020; these threats led to the schools' immediate closures. In response, the regional Department of Education moved 80 affected secondary students to a secure area to study and take final exams.[15]

In Burkina Faso, local and international media sources reported that armed assailants burned at least 18 schools in June and July 2020, after they had reopened, looting canteens before setting fire to school buildings in two cases.[16] In Niger and Burkina Faso, prior to Covid-19 school closures, reports often indicated that school canteens were pillaged during attacks.[17] This may indicate that when schools reopen, their restocked food stores and provisions may render them vulnerable to attacks.

In Mali, armed groups reportedly attacked 27 middle schools after the government re-opened them for exams in June 2020, with the majority of incidents occurring in Mopti region.[18] In one reported incident in Niafunke, Timbuktu region, unidentified armed assailants allegedly burned a school director's office and student materials on June 5, 2020, and warned against students returning to school, according to ACLED.[19] The report did not specify whether the school remained open following the attack.

IMPLICATIONS FOR REOPENING SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

Emerging evidence suggests that as schools and universities in the Central Sahel reopen after Covid-19-related closures, attacks are likely to continue at a rate similar to early 2020. Governments in the region should be aware that fewer reports of attacks during Covid-19 closures may not indicate a reduced threat of attack. In fact, they should begin preparations now for safe, inclusive, gender, and age-responsive returns to school.

Previous patterns of attacks on education in the region can inform response. GCPEA has found that while attacks on education have subsided during summer holidays in several parts of the region, armed groups re-escalated campaigns against education at the beginning of the new school year. For example, GCPEA identified 12 attacks on education in Mali in October 2019 coinciding with the first weeks of the academic year. Incident reports described the attacks as warnings against the reopening of schools; no attacks were recorded during the school holidays.[20] However, closing schools has not necessarily prevented attacks from continuing in affected areas of the Central Sahel. Burkina Faso, for instance, had the highest numbers of both school closures and attacks on education in the region in 2019.[21]

As a new school year approaches in October 2020, Central Sahel governments must carefully plan to safely reopen schools in areas of insecurity where students, teachers, and schools remain at an elevated risk of attack. Where insecurity continues to prevent schools from reopening, the efforts of governments and partners to advance distance learning should be continued and strengthened to ensure affected students continue learning.

Finally, non-state armed groups perpetrating attacks in the Central Sahel region operate across borders and use similar tactics to similar effects in the three countries. School reopening campaigns provide an opportune moment to share good practices to prevent and respond to attacks in an age and gender-responsive way and to strengthen regional approaches to protecting education and monitoring and reporting.

In June 2019, a facilitator assists a student with a radio school lesson in Dori, Burkina Faso.
Armed groups had attacked and destroyed the student's school while the student was in class.
© 2019 UNICEF/UN032926/Bindra

BETTER ENSURING SAFE EDUCATION IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

The governments of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have taken positive steps toward protecting education, including by endorsing and implementing the Safe Schools Declaration. Among other steps,the Ministry of Education and the Safe Schools Technical Committee in Mali issued a letter to the Ministry of Defence asking them to respect the spirit of the *Guidelines* while schools were closed due to the pandemic and not use schools for military purposes.[22] In Burkina Faso, meanwhile, the Minister of Education announced in May 2020 that Covid-19-related distance learning would extend to students affected by conflict.[23] By implementing the recommendations in this briefing paper, governments, donors, and international humanitarian and development actors can better ensure the safety of students and educators in the Central Sahel during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond.

To learn more about where attacks on education are happening in the Central Sahel and around the world, explore the *Education under Attack 2020* report and interactive website.

Data for the paper comes from the database behind GCPEA's flagship report, Education under Attack*, which is generously supported by the Education Above All Foundation, Education Cannot Wait, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and an anonymous donor.*

GCPEA is a coalition of organizations that includes: co-chairs Human Rights Watch and Save the Children, the Institute of International Education (IIE), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Education Above All Foundation (EAA), Plan International, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

This paper is the result of independent research conducted by GCPEA. It is independent of the individual member organizations of the Steering Committee of GCPEA and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Steering Committee member organizations.

[1] OCHA, "Overview of Humanitarian Needs and Requirements Sahel Crisis," May 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/HNRO%20Sahel%20May%202020.pdf (accessed August 3, 2020).

[2] OCHA, "Overview of Humanitarian Needs and Requirements Sahel Crisis," May 2020, p. 8.

[3] OCHA, "Overview of Humanitarian Needs and Requirements Sahel Crisis," p. 8; UNICEF, " Nearly 5 million children will need humanitarian assistance in central Sahel this year as violence surges," Press release, January 27, 2020, https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/nearly-5-million-children-will-need-humanitarian-assistance-central-sahel-year(accessed August 3, 2020).

[4] GCPEA, *Education under Attack 2020* (New York: GCPEA, July 2020), eua2020.protectingeducation.org.

[5] Human Rights Watch, *"Their War Against Education": Armed Group Attacks on Teachers, Students, and Schools in Burkina Faso*, (New York: Human Rights Watch, May 2020), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/05/BurkinaFaso0520_web.pdf (accessed July 30, 2020).

[6] For example: Francesco Bellina, "Niger, Part 2: Counting the dead, waiting for justice," The New Humanitarian, April 1, 2019, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/special-report/2019/04/01/niger-counting-dead-waiting-justice-militias-jihadists (accessed August 17, 2020); Hilary Matfess, "JNIM: A rising threat to stability in the Sahel," ACLED, February 1, 2019 https://acleddata.com/2019/02/01/jnim-a-rising-threat-to-stability-in-the-sahel/ (accessed August 17, 2020); Human Rights Watch, *"By Day We Fear the Army, By Night the Jihadists" Abuses by Armed Islamists and Security Forces in Burkina Faso*, (New York: Human Rights Watch, May 2018).

[7] GCPEA, *Education under Attack 2020*; Human Rights Watch, *"Their War Against Education"*.

[8] GCPEA, *Education under Attack 2020*, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali chapters.

[9] Information received via email from the Education Cluster. Several organizations began reporting data on threats to schools and teachers in June 2020 which caused the number of threats during this month to appear significantly higher than in other months.

[10] *Le Pays*; *Infowakat*, as cited in ACLED, Event ID BFO3610 (data downloaded July 17, 2020)."Ouagadougou: Scuffles between students on campus of Kossodo and police on patrol (Ouagadougou: Échauffourées entre des étudiants de la cité universitaire de Kossodo et des gendarmes en patrouille)," *NetAfrique*, April 1, 2020, https://netafrique.net/ouagadougou-echauffourees-entre-des-etudiants-de-la-cite-universitaire-de-kossodo-et-des-gendarmes-en-patrouille/ (accessed August 3, 2020).

[11] Sahel Security Alerts; *L'Observateur Paalga*; Gulmu Info, as cited in ACLED, Event ID BFO3685 (data downloaded July 17, 2020); "Terrorism: Logoubou: one dead, the CEG, at the high school burned (Terrorisme: Logoubou : un mort, le CEG et le lycée incendié)," *NetAfrique,* April 30, 2020, https://netafrique.net/burkina-faso-terrorisme-logoubou-un-mort-le-ceg-et-le-lycee-incendie/ (accessed August 3, 2020).

[12] "A letter for Laye: Has coronavirus obscured terrorism?(Une lettre pour Laye : le Coronavirus a-t-il occulté le terrorisme?)," *l'Observateur Paalga*, May 7, 2020, http://www.lobservateur.bf/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=5013 (accessed August 3, 2020); *l'Observateur Paalga*, as cited in ACLED, Event ID BFO3709 (data downloaded July 17, 2020).

[13] Whatsapp, as cited in ACLED, Event ID NIR1321 (data downloaded July 17, 2020).

[14] Correspondences with NGO and UN respondents, July 2020.

[15] OCHA, "West and Central Africa: Weekly Regional Humanitarian Snapshot (23 – 29 June 2020), July 2, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/External%20Weekly%2023%20-%2029%20June%202020.pdf (accessed July 21, 2020).

[16] For example: "Burkina Faso: a school burned by presumed terrorists in the Northwest (Burkina Faso : une école incendiée par des terroristes présumés dans le nord-ouest)," *Xinhua*, June 21, 2020, http://french.xinhuanet.com/2020-06/21/c_139156282.htm (accessed August 3, 2020); Whatsapp; Facebook, as cited in ACLED, Event ID BFO3832 (data downloaded July 17, 2020); "Burkina Faso: a school burned down in Banwa province (Burkina Faso: Une école primaire incendiée dans la province des Banwa)," *Informateur*, June 22, 2020, https://www.informateur.info/burkina-faso-une-ecole-primaire-incendiee-dans-la-province-des-banwa/ (accessed August 3, 2020); "Tapoa: 5 schools burned in silence (Tapoa: 5 écoles brûlées dans le silence)," *Gulmu Info*, July 28, 2020, https://gulmu.info/tapoa-5-ecoles-brulees-dans-le-silence/ (accessed August 3, 2020).

[17] GCPEA, *Education under Attack 2020* (New York: GCPEA, July 2020).

[18] Correspondences with NGO respondents, August 2020.

[19] Undisclosed source, as cited in ACLED, Event ID MLI3893 (data downloaded July 23, 2020).

[20] GCPEA, *Education under Attack 2020*, p. 168

[21] UNICEF, "Central Sahel Advocacy Brief," January 27, 2020, https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/Central-sahel-advocacy_brief-2020_0.pdf (accessed August 4, 2020), p. 7; see data above for attacks on education.

[22] "Protection of education during the Covid-19 pandemic (Protection de l'éducation en période de la pandémie de Covid-19)," Letter from the Malian Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Defense. Copy on file.

[23] "Coronavirus in Burkina Faso: school resumes on the radio! (Coronavirus au Burkina Faso: l'école reprend à la radio!)," *BeninWeb*, May 8, 2020, https://beninwebtv.com/2020/05/coronavirus-au-burkina-faso-lecole-reprend-a-la-radio/ (accessed August 17, 2020).