

Practical Impact of the Safe Schools Declaration

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The Safe Schools Declaration and the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict* (the *Guidelines*) have succeeded in highlighting the issue of attacks on students, teachers, schools, and universities, and the military use of schools and universities as a global problem, and represent a coordinated international political response to address this problem. The Safe Schools Declaration was opened for endorsement in May 2015, and as of December 2021, had been endorsed by 113 countries.

Downward Trends in Incidents of Military Use of Schools

- The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) found that the overall reported incidents of military use of schools and universities declined by more than half between 2015 and 2020 in the 13 countries that endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration in 2015 and 2016 and experienced at least one reported incident of military use during the same period (**Afghanistan, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Iraq, Kenya, Lebanon, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Palestine, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan**).¹
 - Based on United Nations (UN), non-governmental organization, and media sources, GCPEA found at least 180 reported incidents of military use of schools and universities in 2015, as compared to some 70 reported incidents in 2020, among these countries.
 - GCPEA found that reports of incidents of military use of schools and universities decreased in five of the 13 countries during the same time period (**Afghanistan, CAR, DRC, Somalia, South Sudan**).²
 - In two of the 13 countries, reported incidents of military use remained approximately the same (**Nigeria and Palestine**); only two countries saw an increase (Iraq and Sudan) during the same time period.
 - Reports of military use of schools or universities were few and infrequent in four of the 13 countries (**Kenya, Lebanon, Mozambique, Niger**), and thus GCPEA was unable to determine any increase or decrease between 2015 and 2020.
- GCPEA has not identified any reports of military use of schools or universities by UN peacekeeping forces occurring since early 2017.

Heightened International Standards on Military Use of Schools

- In June 2015, a month after the launch of the Safe Schools Declaration, the UN Security Council for the first time encouraged all member states “to take concrete measures to deter such [military] use of schools by armed forces and armed groups.”³ In July 2018, the Security Council repeated this call.⁴ In **Resolution 2601**⁵ (2021) on the protection of education during conflict, the Security Council encouraged Member States “to take concrete measures to mitigate and avoid the use of schools by armed forces, as appropriate, and deter the use of schools by armed groups.”
- 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*.⁶ UN DPO has subsequently released a range of training materials that reference the child protection policy and ban on military use of schools.
- The first public draft of the *Guidelines* was presented to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in June 2013. In the years since, three UN treaty bodies have made recommendations to some 16 countries on strengthening protections for schools from military use, including to CAR the Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, and Thailand. (In contrast to five such recommendations in all previous years.)

Increased Protection of Schools from Military Use in National Policy and Practice

Since the Declaration was opened for endorsement in 2015, there have been **tangible improvements in law and practice to protect education from attack.**

- Denmark,⁷ Ecuador,⁸ New Zealand,⁹ and Switzerland¹⁰ have updated their military manuals including explicit protections for schools from military use. The United Kingdom¹¹ and Norway¹² 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.¹³
- In 2016, the Ministry of Education of **Afghanistan** wrote to the Ministry of Interior and the National Security Council calling on security forces to evacuate schools. Between 2016 and 2020, military use of schools significantly declined according to UN verified data.¹⁴
- In 2017, **Cameroon’s** education minister cited the Safe Schools Declaration to encourage military personnel working as teachers in schools affected by the conflict with Boko Haram to carry out their educational actions in civilian clothes and without weapons.¹⁵
- Following the **Central African Republic’s** endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration, the UN peacekeeping mission in the country issued a directive replicating much of the text of the *Guidelines*, and then stating that “the use of a school or university by a party to a conflict is not permitted.”¹⁶ In 2015 and 2016 schools occupied by peacekeepers were vacated; and in another instance peacekeepers turned down an offer to use a school for accommodation. Moreover, the directive reinforced the importance for the mission of protecting schools from military use, and in 2016, the mission successfully vacated five schools that were being occupied by armed groups in the country. In addition to the directive, in 2020, the government promulgated the Child Protection Code, which criminalizes attacks on schools and their occupation. This is the **first piece of legislation in Africa banning or criminalizing military use of schools.**
- Also in CAR, the Safe Schools Declaration Technical Committee launched an Action Plan in March 2020 with concrete activities to disseminate the *Guidelines* and incorporate protection of schools and universities into national legislation. Further, in 2018 and 2019, three armed groups signed Action Plans with the UN Office of the

Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG CAAC), which covers four grave violations against children, including attacks on schools.¹⁷

- In South Sudan, implementation of the comprehensive action plan covering all six grave violations against children, including attacks against schools, was signed in 2020 by the Government and endorsed by all parties to the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan, and has since progressed.¹⁸
- The armed forces of **Cote d'Ivoire** have integrated a specific module on “the prohibition of occupation of schools and training institutions” into the trainings provided in military schools, academies, and training centers.¹⁹
- **Italy's** National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security for 2020-24 contains a specific commitment by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote the Safe Schools Declaration by sharing good practice and using peer advocacy. The plan also envisions stronger collaboration between the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Defense Ministry to protect women and girls, including by developing a specific children and armed conflict module in training for military personnel.²⁰
- The Code of Conduct for the Palestinian National Security Forces in **Lebanon** finalized in March 2019, includes special protections for “schools and universities”—a phrase that mirrors the formulation in the *Guidelines*, even though there are no universities in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.²¹
- In **Mali** in early 2019, the education ministry established a Technical Committee for operationalizing the Declaration, including two representatives from the defense ministry. 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. In October 2020, the Technical Committee held a capacity-building workshop on implementing the Safe Schools Declaration and the *Guidelines*. Mali is also reportedly working on a draft law on Protecting Schools and Universities during the Armed Conflicts in Mali.²²
- In December 2018, a working group chaired by the Federal Ministry of Education in **Nigeria** proposed an amendment to the country's Armed Forces Act that, if it becomes law, would ban the requisition by the armed forces of premises used for educational purposes. The Act is still to be adopted.
- In November 2020, the Nigerian National Human Rights Commission launched a two-day training program for its staff on Principles of the Safe Schools Declaration to further build their capacity to protect education from attack and monitor violations.
- In October 2021, the Nigerian Ministry of Defence, 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.
- Drawing on the *Guidelines*, in September 2021, Nigeria released its National Policy for Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools.²³
- In August 2018, the **Palestinian Ministry of Education**, with support from Save the Children and Defense for Children International, developed an action plan on implementing the Declaration.
- In **Somalia**, in 2017, in the context of implementing the Declaration, the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) handed a number of educational buildings back to the authorities, rehabilitating them first, and working with partners to ensure the grounds were clear of explosive remnants.
- In June 2020, in **Spain**, the Ministry of Defense released its new national defense directive²⁴ stating that in their operations abroad, the armed forces will be supporting implementation of “the Safe Schools initiative”

- In 2017, **Sudan** circulated a command order to all divisions prohibiting the military use of schools.²⁵ The UN verified that state security forces in Sudan vacated at least three schools in 2018.²⁶
- **Yemen** endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration in October 2017, and in 2019 the Group of Experts on Yemen informed the UN Human Rights Council that “sources reported that the Yemeni armed forces have commenced to withdraw from some schools as per the commitments taken under the Safe Schools Declaration.”²⁷ The Ministry of Education has also established a Safe Schools Committee.
- The Government of **Ukraine** adopted an action plan for implementing the Safe Schools Declaration in August 2021. Civil society is supporting the government in training officers in the armed forces on the Safe Schools Declaration and the *Guidelines*. So far, at least 1000 military officials have been trained.
- In August 2020, the **United Kingdom** published an updated policy paper on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict.²⁸ The paper notes the country’s endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration and the need to improve accountability for violations of children’s rights in conflict.

Increased Dialogue and Engagement, Particularly with Military Actors, Regarding Protecting Schools

- Strong cooperation and information sharing are instrumental in improving the protection of students, teachers, and schools. The four major international conferences on the Safe Schools Declaration, in Oslo, Buenos Aires, Palma de Mallorca, and Abuja, brought together defense, education, and foreign affairs representatives along with civil society to exchange examples of good practice in better protecting students, teachers, and schools.
- Through the framework of the Declaration, defense actors and representatives from ministries of education, UN agencies, and international NGOs, have participated in regional workshops organized by GCPEA to exchange promising practices and examples of increased implementation of the Declaration, including in Istanbul in 2015, Addis Ababa in 2016, and in Panama City in 2017.
- In February and March, 2021, the Spanish Government, with support from GCPEA, convened a virtual training course on effective implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration and exchange of good practice in safeguarding education. The training brought together over 90 representatives from ministries of defense, education and foreign affairs from 20 countries. At the Abuja Conference, Spain committed to holding similar trainings in 2022 and beyond.
- At the Third International Conference on Safe Schools in 2019, Norway undertook to establish a network of states to mutually support and strengthen implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration. In 2021, Norway, together with GCPEA, facilitated two regional consultations with states on the network’s objectives. The first, with countries in the Sahel region, was hosted by Mali, and the second, with European and Central Asian countries, was hosted by Luxembourg. The network was launched at the Fourth International Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration in Abuja, Nigeria in October, 2021, with the aim of promoting cooperation, assistance, and peer-to-peer exchange of experiences and good practice amongst endorsing states.
- NGOs have used the *Guidelines* as a tool to engage with military or non-state armed groups on the need to stop using schools. For example, GCPEA, Geneva Call, and Human Rights Watch have trained representatives from armed forces, police forces, and non-state armed groups on the *Guidelines*. These trainings contributed to broadening the general appreciation by armed forces and groups of the need to protect schools and universities, and education itself. Save the Children successfully advocated for the issues of military use of schools and attacks on

education to be incorporated into a NATO training scenario. The ICRC has offered technical advice to all interested parties regarding how to best implement the Declaration and *Guidelines* in specific contexts.

- The Declaration has also been highlighted during the UN Security Council Open Debates on Protection of Civilians, Children and Armed Conflict, and Women, Peace, and Security, as well as at the Human Rights Council. GCPEA estimates that at least 82 states delivered statements positively referencing the Declaration during the period 2019-2020.
 - On September 10, 2020, the Security Council, under the presidency of the Republic of Niger, held an **Open Debate on Attacks against Schools as a Grave Violation of Children’s Rights**²⁹- the first formal debate by the Security Council on attacks on education. GCPEA briefed the Council in person, sharing its findings and recommendations, particularly on the Sahel region.
 - The UN Security Council issued a milestone **Presidential Statement**, (PRST)³⁰ – the first outcome document solely focused on attacks on education. The PRST noted the efforts of states that have endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration and highlighted the impact of attacks on education on women and girls. During the debate, nine states underscored the importance of the Safe Schools Declaration and GCPEA’s research.
 - The UN Security Council Open Debate and **Resolution**³¹ on the protection of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population held on April 27, 2021, referenced the military use of schools in contravention of applicable international law, and recognized the risk that such use might make schools targets of attack and threaten the safety of teachers and students.
 - On June 29, 2021, in **Resolution 2584**³² the Security Council encouraged the Government of Mali to continue its efforts to strengthen the legal framework on child protection, including through implementing the Safe Schools Declaration.
 - In a **Public Statement**³³ issued on April 28, 2021, the Chair of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict urged South-Sudan to respect its Safe Schools Declaration commitments.
 - At the 47th session of the Human Rights Council, in July 2021, **the resolution**³⁴ on the right to education, referenced the Safe Schools Declaration and the *Guidelines* for the first time, and called on states to consider implementing them.
 - On October 29, 2021, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted **Resolution 2601 (2021)**³⁵ **on the protection of education during conflict**, the first thematic resolution on attacks on education. It condemns attacks against schools, children, and teachers and urges parties to the conflict to immediately safeguard the right to education. The resolution references the Safe Schools Declaration, and makes explicit the links between education, peace, and security. **A UN Security Council Arrria- Formula Meeting**³⁶ was held on December 6 to discuss concrete steps for implementing Resolution 2601, including through implementing the Safe Schools Declaration.
- High-level UN officials have expressed support for the Declaration, including UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who urged all states to endorse the Declaration in his annual reports on children and armed conflict in 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021. The Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba, regularly calls for endorsement of the Declaration, and conducts bilateral advocacy with states to encourage endorsement and implementation.
- The first annual UN International Day to Protect Education from Attack was established by a unanimous decision of the UN General Assembly and celebrated on September 9, 2020, providing an annual opportunity to galvanize action to protect education.

- The African Union’s Peace and Security Council has, over the years, welcomed the Declaration. For example, at its **994th meeting on May 11, 2021**³⁷, the Council took “note of the growing number of AU Member States who have signed and endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration and its *Guidelines* as a non-binding framework assisting States in undertaking their respective obligations under international law.”
- The **African Union Doctrine on Peace Support Operations**³⁸, adopted in January 2021, directly refers to the central commitment of the Safe Schools Declaration, 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 peace-keepers.
- In its first Education in Emergencies policy communication in 2018, the **European Commission** voiced support for the Declaration, declaring that the EU “will support initiatives to promote and roll out the Safe Schools Declaration,” and acknowledging that the practice of military use of schools increases violence in education settings, and negatively affects access to education.³⁹ In the **EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child released in 2021**⁴⁰, the European Commission’s key actions include to “continue allocating 10% of humanitarian aid funding for education in emergencies and protracted crises, and promote the endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration.

¹ Over 50 countries endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration in 2015 while six endorsed in 2016; of those, no countries experienced military use between 2015 and 2020 other than the 13 listed. In the list of 13 countries having experienced military use, all endorsed in 2015 except DRC which endorsed in 2016.

² Although several of these countries experienced overall declines, they had spikes in military use between 2015 and 2020 and some may experience increases in the future.

³ UN Security Council Resolution 2225 (2015).

⁴ UN Security Council Resolution 2427 (2018).

⁵ UN Security Council Resolution 2601 (2021).

⁶ Department of Peacekeeping Operations, Department of Field Support, Department of Political Affairs Policy on Child Protection, June 16, 2017, paras. 9, 16, & 34-37.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Armed Forces of Ecuador, Manual of International Humanitarian Law, DBM-DOC-CC.FF.AA-05-2016, May 2016, Chapter VIII, sec. D.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Swiss Armed Forces Manual on the Law of Armed Conflict, 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ In 2019 and 2020, the UN verified seven and five cases of military use respectively, maintaining a decrease from earlier years: in 2018, the UN verified 5 cases of military use of schools as compared to 42 in 2016 and 17 in 2017, marking a decline of over 90 percent over the three-year period. UN Security Council, “Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict,” S/2020/525, June 9, 2020, para. 23. UN Security Council, “Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General,” A/75/873-S/2021/437, May 6, 2021, para. 16. UN Security Council, “Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict,” S/2019/509, July 30, 2018, para. 23; UN General Assembly and Security Council, “Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General,” S/2017/821, August 24, 2017, para. 28; and United Nations General Assembly and United Nations Security Council, “The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security,” S/2017/508, para. 26.

¹⁵ Letter from Minister of Basic Education to Governor of the Far North Region, November 30, 2017.

¹⁶ United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) directive on the protection of schools and universities against military use, from Special Representative to the Secretary General Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, MINUSCA/OSRSG/046/2015, December 24, 2015.

¹⁷ UN General Assembly, “Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict,” A/75/873-S/2021/437, May 6, 2021, Annex I

¹⁸ UN General Assembly, “Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict,” A/76/231, July 26, 2021, para. 30.

¹⁹ Information from Legal Adviser for Military Operations, Ministry of Defence, Côte d’Ivoire.

²⁰ Italy Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, December 10, 2020, “Italy’s IV Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security (2020 – 2024), in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1325(2000)

²¹ Palestinian National Security Forces in Lebanon, Code of Conduct, March 20, 2019, part 6, art. 5: “The leadership of the Palestinian National Security Forces is committed to protecting ... schools and universities during armed violence and clashes. Equally, the civilian character of ... educational facilities should be preserved at all times. No attack on such facilities should be tolerated and concrete measures should be taken to avoid the military use of such institutions.” English translation provided by Geneva Call.

²² This is according to information received from the Government of Mali at a consultation with countries in the Sahel region held as part of the State-Led Implementation Network on June 16, 2021.

- ²³ Nigeria Ministry of Education and Nigeria Education in Emergencies Working Group, National Policy on Safety, Security, and Violence-Free Schools with its Implementing Guidelines, August 2021, <https://education.gov.ng/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/National-Policy-on-SSVFSN.pdf>
- ²⁴ Spain Ministry of Defence, National Defence Directive 2020, June 2020, <https://www.defensa.gob.es/Galerias/defensadocs/ddn-ingles-2020.pdf>
- ²⁵ Information provided by the Office of the Special Representative to the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, April 2019.
- ²⁶ UN Security Council, “Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict,” S/2019/509, July 30, 2019, para. 165.
- ²⁷ Report of the detailed findings of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, A/HRC/42/CRP.1, September 3, 2019, para. 722.
- ²⁸ United Kingdom, “UK Approach to Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict,” August 27, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-paper-on-the-approach-to-protection-of-civilians-in-armed-conflict/uk-approach-to-protection-of-civilians-in-armed-conflict>.
- ²⁹ UN Security Council, Children and armed conflict: Attacks against schools as a grave violations of children’s rights – Security Council, 8756th meeting, September 10, 2020, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1f/k1fakjuosb>.
- ³⁰ UN Security Council, “Statement by the President of the Security Council,” S/PRST/2020/8, September 10, 2020, <https://undocs.org/S/PRST/2020/8>.
- ³¹ UN Security Council Resolution 2573 (2021).
- ³² UN Security Council Resolution 2584 (2021).
- ³³ Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, “Public Statement by Chair of Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict,” SC/14508, April 28, 2021, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14508.doc.htm>.
- ³⁴ UN General Assembly, UN Human Rights Council, “Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 12 July 2021,” July 26, 2021, A/HRC/RES/47/6.
- ³⁵ UN Security Council Resolution 2601 (2021).
- ³⁶ UN Security Council, Security Council Arria-Formula Meeting on Protection of Education in Conflict, December 6, 2021, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1j/k1j7qviao>.
- ³⁷ African Union Peace and Security Council, “Communique of the 994th meeting of the PSC held on 11 May 2021, on the protection of children in conflict situations in Africa,” June 16, 2021, <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/communique-of-the-994th-meeting-of-the-psc-held-on-11-may-2021-on-the-protection-of-children-in-conflict-situations-in-africa>.
- ³⁸ African Union, African Union Doctrine on Peace Support Operations, January 2021, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_sEXHgyt4_gSK-ph-GIHg_BzQFoSKO6/view.
- ³⁹ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on Education in Emergencies and Protracted Crises, COM (2018) 304, May 18, 2018.
- ⁴⁰ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, COM (2021) 142, March 24, 2021.

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Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack



Secretariat: 350 5th Avenue, 34th Floor, New York, New York 10118-3299

@GCPEATweets · Email: GCPEA@protectingeducation.org

www.protectingeducation.org