Fighting continued in South Sudan in 2020 and 2021, despite the signing of peace accords and formation of a transitional government. Attacks on, and military use of, schools declined slightly compared to previous years. GCPEA also identified two reports of attacks on higher education.

Context

In February 2020, the South Sudanese government and main armed opposition group, Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-Army In Opposition (SPLM/A-IO), established a transitional government under the 2018 peace accords. That same month, President Salva Kiir announced the return to the ten-state system, including three Administrative Areas, which eased a stalled peace process but led to the removal of local government officials from their posts and created disruptions in political, social, and economic relations across South Sudan. Despite the peace accords and formation of the transitional government, fighting periodically surged in 2020 and 2021.

In 2020, the UN documented over 1,100 violent events, an increase compared to the previous year, and which affected over 5,800 civilians, and included sexual violence and the killing of children. In 2021, the UN reported a decrease in the number of violent events and harm against civilians generally, but identified an increase in violence perpetrated by militias against civilians in the Tambura area of Western Equatoria. In the Equatoria region, in the south, the National Salvation Front (NAS), a non-signatory to the peace process, fought against the government’s South Sudan People’s Defense Forces (SSPDF), demanding increased political autonomy for Equatoria, according to the International Crisis Group. In that context, the UN found that NAS abducted men, women, and children to serve in their ranks in Central Equatoria state, and SSPDF soldiers committed sexual violence against women and girls. In the northeast, The New Humanitarian reported increased inter-communal violence in Pibor and Jonglei states in 2021, tied to national politics and disputes over resources including grazing land.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reported that the National Security Service arbitrarily detained, tortured, and forcibly disappeared journalists, activists, and government critics during the reporting period. Amnesty International also reported that security service agents maintained networks at Juba University.

South Sudan experienced several humanitarian crises during the reporting period, including flooding, food insecurity, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Flooding damaged, prevented access to, or caused the closure of around 400 schools in 2020 and over 500 schools in 2021. The UN reported that over 8.3 million people needed humanitarian assistance, including more than 4.5 million children.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, approximately 2.2 million children were out of school in South Sudan. The education of two million additional students was disrupted during school closures which began in March 2020 to prevent the spread of the virus. The government resumed candidate classes in October 2020, then reopened all schools in May 2021. Oxfam found that girl students, many of whom were subjected to forced marriage, gender-based violence, or domestic work during school closures, experienced difficulties returning to school after they reopened.

Attacks on schools

During the 2020-2021 reporting period, GCPEA collected 11 reported incidents of attacks on schools. The number of reported attacks declined slightly compared to previous years, when GCPEA identified approximately ten and 18 reported attacks on schools in 2019 and 2018, respectively.

In 2020, GCPEA identified three reported incidents of attacks on schools, consisting of arson and looting. In addition, the UN Mine Action Service assessed primary schools in Wau, Western Bahr el-Ghazal state, in 2020, to remove and destroy explosive ordnance and ammunition, as well as turn over the land around the schools for safe use. Examples of attacks included:

- On August 16, 2020, a school vehicle was burned in Lobonok area, Central Equatoria.
- In August 2020, assailants reportedly looted Salaam Primary School in Yei town, Central Equatoria state, and burned down the school’s office. According to media reports, textbooks and other learning materials were taken.
from the school, which was closed at the time due to Covid-19 prevention measures. In 2021, GCPEA gathered eight incident reports of attacks on schools, from media, UN, and NGO reporting. Attacks involved, arson, looting, crossfire, and explosive weapons. For instance:

• According to Save the Children and news reports, unidentified assailants looted a school in Eastern Equatoria State on June 20, 2021, killing a security guard and stealing learning kits. No children were present at the time of the attack.

• On July 4, 2021, an armed group looted Liech Primary School in Rubkona internally displaced people camp in Unity state, stealing learning materials and damaging six classrooms.

• On July 8 and 9, 2021, at least two schools were damaged and looted in Marial Lou town, Tonj North county, Warrap state, during fighting between groups of armed youth, according to the UN and news reports.

• On November 3, 2021, a grenade explosion at an out-of-use school in Ayod county, Jonglei state, killed three children and wounded seven others, according to local media outlet Radio Tamazuj.

Military use of schools and universities

In 2020 and 2021, GCPEA identified at least ten reported instances of the military use of schools. In comparison, Education under Attack 2020 included 20 and 35 reports of military use in 2019 and 2018, respectively.

The UN verified the use of ten schools by SSPDF and SPLM/A-IO in 2020. Also in 2020, the UN Mine Action Service surveyed a primary school in Bentiu, Unity state, which had been used as a military garrison, in order to remove explosive ordnance. Separately, GCPEA gathered four reports of the military use of schools in 2020, some of which may overlap with the UN-verified incidents:

• Around January 1, 2020, government forces which had been occupying Jambo primary school in Mugwo County, Yei River state, reportedly vacated the institution, according to the county commissioner in an interview with local media outlet Radio Tamazuj.

• The UN reported that, on January 7, 2020, SSPDF and Sudan People’s Liberation Army in Opposition soldiers used a school in Kalyak, Unity, to host police forces.

• Sometime between June 1 and early August 2020, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North Malik Agar faction occupied a school in Maban county, Upper Nile state, according to the UN.

• In an offensive on Lasu town, in Yei River state, in December 2019, SSPDF soldiers occupied Lasu primary school, as well as injuring civilians and burning churches, according to the UN. The soldiers reportedly continued to partially occupy the primary school through 2020 and into late 2021, creating fear in students who attended classes there.

In 2021, the UN verified the use of nine schools. Between June and August of that year, the UN verified the occupation of two schools, one in Western Bahr el-Ghazal state by SPLM/A-IO, and another in Central Equatoria state by SSPDF.

In September and October 2021, GCPEA identified two cases of military use, which may overlap with the UN-verified incidents:

• For several weeks around September and October 2021, SSPDF soldiers occupied a primary school in Tambura town, Western Equatoria state. Amnesty International documented that the soldiers used the school as a barracks during fighting, until government representatives negotiated with them to vacate the premises.

• SSPDF forces used a primary school in Yei town, Central Equatoria state, as a barracks in October 2021. Parents and the community transferred their children from the school for fear of the soldiers harassing students.

Attacks on higher education

During the 2020-2021 reporting period, GCPEA identified two reports of attacks on higher education. Higher education
attacks appeared to remain constant with 2018 and 2019, when GCPEA identified one attack each year. In 2020, GCPEA identified two reported attacks on higher education. Of these, one event directly targeted a higher education facility and the other affected university students:

- On June 20, 2020, alleged SSPDF soldiers looted non-governmental organizations housed inside a Christian college in Romogi, Central Equatoria state, as reported by local media outlet Radio Tamazuj.
- On November 23, 2020, security forces reportedly injured ten students and arrested four students protesting at the University of Juba, in Juba, Central Equatoria state. International media outlet Voice of America reported the students protested over the expulsion of some of their peers from the university.

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1508 Richard Ruati, “Hope revived as schools reopen,” UNICEF article.
1512 Information received from an international NGO respondent via email on January 2, 2022.
1515 A full list of references can be found on GCPEA’s website, https://protectingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/eua_2022_references.pdf
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