

# Displaced, Denied, Destroyed

Educational sites in Afghanistan are changing from bastions of hope and safety into spaces of fear, armed conflict and politics.

Rather than safe spaces for learning, schools in Afghanistan are increasingly becoming military, ideological and political battlegrounds. The international community and parties to the conflict in Afghanistan are neglecting and violating established commitments to protect students, teachers and educational facilities in armed conflict.

## Context

Whilst tremendous gains in rebuilding the public education system in Afghanistan have been achieved, worrying new barriers to education are arising across the country. These are primarily due to rising conflict and insecurity, but impoverishment and gender discrimination are also increasingly threatening to reverse the progress made since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2012. Today over 2.6 million Afghan boys and girls are still unable to access primary education, according to [UNICEF's 2018 study on out-of-school children](#).

The upsurge in armed conflict over the past two years has displaced over a million Afghans within their own country; the majority of whom are children. NRC's 2018 study [Escaping War: Where to Next?](#) found few families have access to basic services whilst they are displaced, depending more upon extended family members than they can on the government or aid agencies. When a high number of Afghan boys and girls who have fled armed conflict

arrive into an area, it can easily overwhelm an already struggling public school systems.

Current projections outline that it will be impossible for Afghanistan to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 4 target of ensuring all boys and girls can complete primary education by 2030, without serious and immediate remedial action. Afghanistan remains the country furthest behind on SDG4 in the South Asia region, which is one of the regions furthest behind globally. The turmoil of multiple and protracted forced displacement has clearly played a significant part in hindering progress.

In 2017, the Humanitarian Country Team for Afghanistan officially recognised education as a [humanitarian priority](#), with some six per cent of the overall 2018 [Humanitarian Response Plan](#) (HRP) for Afghanistan (547m USD) dedicated to Education in Emergency. However, as of early July 2018, the *Education in Emergencies* response for Afghanistan was only 12.5% funded. Despite leading donors'

global commitments and rhetoric, resources for the safety and future of Afghan children seem bleaker than ever. Moreover, their schools, and their future are increasingly under attack.

## Education in Insecurity and Conflict

Education is increasingly a casualty in Afghanistan. Worsening armed conflict, looming political elections, and resurgent armed groups are all emerging risks. These risks come on top of the long-standing issues affecting access to education in the country, which include impoverishment, corruption, and socio-cultural discrimination of women and girls.

### Impact of armed conflict on education

The [2018 Education Under Attack](#) report outlined the continuing high levels of attacks on Afghan students, staff and educational facilities (including their occupation by security forces and non-state armed groups). The report found that Afghanistan, along with Nigeria, suffered the most frequent number of targeted, fatal attacks against students and educators globally. Attacks on education during conflict constitute violations of every child's right to education, as well as various articles of international humanitarian and criminal law.

There are many unfortunate examples to draw upon to illustrate how the growing armed conflict is impacting upon education in Afghanistan. On 2 April 2018, the [Afghan Air Force bombed an informal education site in Kunduz Province](#), causing at least 107 civilian casualties – the vast majority (81) of which were children, a [UN investigation](#) later found. Afghan defence forces claimed they had mistaken the site as a (Taliban) military gathering. Later, on 3 June 2018, the Islamic State in Khorasan issued a letter in Nangarhar Province stating that they would target girls' educational facilities as retaliation for civilian casualties by international and Afghan military airstrikes in their areas.

In eastern Afghanistan, where there is a resurgent Islamic State ('Daesh') still exercising territorial control of districts in Nangarhar Province –there has been an upsurge in targeted attacks against

schools. Most recently, on 1 July 2018, an [attack on a school in Khogyani District](#), Nangarhar, where NRC was supporting schooling for over a hundred Afghan displaced children, resulted in the killing of 3 staff and destruction of the school building. This attack followed 12 attacks on students, educators and educational facilities in the previous month (June), which is quadruple the average number of similar incidents over the two months prior. It is undeniable that risks to education in conflict-affected parts of Afghanistan is incredibly high and rising.



NRC/Andrea Castorina (2018). Photo of conflict-damaged school in Zhari District, Kandahar.

### Impact of elections on education

The *2018 Education Under Attack* report also noted that the last peak of violence affecting education came during the last presidential elections and run-off elections in 2014, in which the government used schools as polling centres. A [UN Human Rights report](#) from May 2018 examined the increasing levels of election-related violence in the first month of voter registration for the parliamentary elections, noting that about three quarters of violent incidents by the time of writing affecting the elections occurred in schools or mosques.

Over 60 per cent of the more than 7,000 voter registration and polling centres identified in the forthcoming parliamentary and presidential elections are schools. This forces the education sector into even higher levels of risk over the next 18 months of election periods, with no mitigation measures yet put in place.



NRC/Andrea Castorina – Conflict-damaged school previously occupied by pro-government militia, now used as an Education in Emergency site for NRC, in Zhari District, Kandahar.

### Impact of resurgent armed groups

Asides from increased armed conflict and forthcoming political elections, changing *de facto* control over the country has also had a stark impact on access to education for millions of Afghans. An [addendum](#) to the US Special Inspector-General for Afghan Reconstruction's (SIGAR) January 2018 quarterly report to US Congress stated that, in comparison to 2015: the percentage of districts under 'insurgent' control has doubled, the percentage of contested districts has risen by nearly 50%, and the percentage of districts under government control or influence had decreased by over 20%.

Nonetheless, a report released by the Overseas Development Institute in 2018, [Life Under the Taliban Shadow Government](#), affirmed the possibilities for continuing access to primary education in areas that were not controlled by the government. It outlined that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan had reversed its previous direction on Taliban fighters targeting schools and teachers in 2009, with the *Layha* code of conduct updated accordingly in 2010. Whilst all parties to the conflict have occupied and attacked schools, the report outlined the sporadic nature of incidents caused by Taliban fighters, rather than a systematic issue.

Whilst the number of attacks on education are high and increasing, there are clear ways to reverse this trend. Most importantly, all parties to the conflict

must observe obligations arising from the Oslo Safe Schools Declaration, and also proactively mitigate predictable risks expected to be generated by the forthcoming elections.

## Protecting Students through Armed Conflict in Afghanistan

Aware of these mounting risks and violations to Education in Afghanistan, NRC – whose 2017 *Education in Emergency* programme in Afghanistan assisted over 100,000 girls, boys, women and men – conducted research with 1,407 internally displaced, refugee returnee children, parents and teachers to better understand risks within schooling. The surveys, interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in 2018 in the conflict-affected provinces of Faryab, Hirat, Kandahar, Khost, Kunar, Kunduz, Nangarhar and Sar-e Pul. All areas where NRC maintains operational presence, including for education.

One of the key findings was that the financial burden and vulnerability of forced displacement is perhaps the most prevalent barrier, with displaced families increasingly dependent on child labour to make ends meet. Whilst 11 per cent of surveyed children were working whilst in their place of origin, 36 per cent were now working since displacement. Child labour decreased enrolment, attendance and completion rates.

However, beyond the abject poverty that forced displacement generates, the most striking findings concerned the insecurity, fear and trauma affecting displaced children. 28 per cent of surveyed children and parents stated that schools in their places of origin had been closed due to the conflict. NRC found that the majority of surveyed children do not feel safe at school, with many boys and girls terrified that their school would be attacked. 12 per cent had experienced attacks on their school and 15 per cent experienced shooting very near to their school building. Many had missed exams or periods of school, either because of threats from armed actors, or because they or their parents believed that the school would be targeted. 36 per cent of the

children were frightened about risks of kidnap or attack *en route* to school.

Exposure to continuous risk, violence and conflict has had a significant impact on children's psychosocial health. Many children interviewed had witnessed horrific violence and many were troubled by gruesome and intrusive memories that made it difficult to function in daily life, let alone study. 55 per cent of survey participants cited psycho-social health needs as the biggest challenge for displaced Afghan children: nightmares, flashbacks, physical pain, nausea, fainting, difficulty concentrating or socialising and strong emotional responses such as frequent crying or anger were all common. However, accompanying psycho-social support has been neglected in the critically under-funded Education in Emergency response.

## Protecting Education in Conflict

Pre-empting this, over the past nine months, NRC has contextualised and piloted the [Better Learning Programme](#) (BLP – originally developed with the University of Tromsø through pilots in Uganda and Gaza) - an accompanying psychosocial support programme to Education in Emergency programming in Nangarhar Province, which is now scaling up in Faryab, Kunduz and Uruzgan provinces.

In addition, NRC Afghanistan's new 2018-2020 Protection Strategy will focus partly on protecting education and operationalising the Oslo Safe Schools Declaration. Many parts of the operational guidelines have not yet been contextualised or implemented in Afghanistan, including unarmed physical protection measures, humanitarian negotiations, early warning and alert systems, alternative delivery of education, psychosocial support and school-based security plans. To do so,

NRC will work alongside other partners, including both international and Afghan NGOs such as [Geneva Call](#) and Pen Path.

### NRC recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1:** Voter registration and polling centres for the forthcoming Afghan presidential elections and potential run-off **elections** must be located in sites other than schools. All stakeholders must take immediate actions to minimise risks to students, staff, and educational facilities throughout the parliamentary elections
- **Recommendation 2:** All signatories to the 2015 Oslo **Safe Schools Declaration**, including the Afghan government and other UN member states, must not only ensure that their defence and security forces respect schools as protected civil objects, but also enable neutral organisations to help take sufficient preventive actions that reduce physical and psychosocial protection risks to students, staff, and schools. This entails permissions and humanitarian **independence** from the Afghan government, and sufficient **resources** from the international community. Other belligerents, including the USA, should consider endorsing the Oslo Safe Schools Declaration, and all non-state armed groups should adhere to its principles.
- **Recommendation 3:** Donors must increase financing commitments to Education in Emergencies and help shape the multi-year Humanitarian Response Plan for better education and protection outcomes - including education (and its protection) in conflict-affected and non-government-controlled areas.

Links to other relevant information:

- NRC Afghanistan: [www.nrc.no/countries/asia/afghanistan/](http://www.nrc.no/countries/asia/afghanistan/)
- Safe Schools Declaration: [www.protectingeducation.org/safeschoolsdeclaration](http://www.protectingeducation.org/safeschoolsdeclaration)