

Successfully Transforming Education Requires Protecting It from Attack

A GCPEA Brief about Attacks on Higher Education ahead of the Transforming Education Summit

September 2022

The Transforming Education Summit, to be held on September 19, 2022, at the 77th United Nations General Assembly, aims to mobilize solidarity and political will to transform education, and invites Heads of State to make commitments towards [Sustainable Development Goal 4 \(SDG 4\)](#), Quality Education. To recover pandemic-related learning losses and achieve SDG 4, education must be protected at all levels, including higher education.

More than **320 attacks on universities, students, and academics** reportedly occurred in 2020 and 2021 in the 28 conflict-affected countries profiled in the [Education under Attack 2022](#) report from the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack ([GCPEA](#)). Attacks on higher education include airstrikes, shelling, and bombings with improvised explosive devices (IEDs); armed forces and non-state armed groups using universities for military purposes; and repression of education-related protests. These attacks not only kill and injure students and academics, they also impact educational communities for long periods. When universities are damaged or destroyed, some close and may not be repaired for months or years. There are also psychological impacts: academics and students live in fear, and some students never resume their education. Attacks on higher education also affect primary and secondary education, since violence and repression can lead to disruptions in teacher training.



A corner of the University of the State Fiscal Service of Ukraine after shelling in Irpin, Ukraine, in early March. © 2022 Hesther Ng / SOPA Images / Sipa USA Sipa via AP Images

Attacks on higher education involving the use of explosive weapons

Explosive weapons inflict death and injury on students, professors, and staff, as well as considerable damage to educational infrastructure. These attacks include airstrikes, shelling, the use of IEDs, and antipersonnel mines, which can cause indiscriminate harm and damage. Examples include:

- In Syria, on July 21, 2021, artillery shells reportedly struck a compound housing a teacher training institute in Bara town, Jabal al Zaweya, Idlib governorate, causing damage to the building.¹
- In Cameroon, on November 10, 2021, an IED allegedly placed by an armed group detonated and injured at least 11 students at the University of Buea, in South-West region.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a number of attacks on universities involving explosive weapons have occurred. For example:

- On March 3, 2022, shelling allegedly damaged a dormitory and sports stadium at the University of the State Fiscal Service of Ukraine in Irpin city, Kyiv region, Ukraine, as reported by *AP*, *Frontline*, and *PBS*.

Military use of universities by armed forces or non-state armed groups

Prolonged Covid-19-related closures in 2020 and 2021 increased some universities' vulnerability to military use, for example, as bases, barracks, and fighting positions, sometimes putting them at risk of subsequent targeting.

- The Taliban reportedly took over the campus of the American University in Afghanistan in August 2021, allegedly replacing the university's flag with their own flag. Hundreds of students were enrolled at the university at the time.
- In Ethiopia, around November 2021, Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) forces reportedly used two Wollo University campuses, in Dessie and Kombolcha towns, Amhara region. Airstrikes reportedly damaged the campuses while TPLF forces were present.

Attacks on higher education students and staff in the context of Covid-19

During the Covid-19 pandemic, students and academic staff in some countries were met with excessive force by police when protesting policies related to distance learning or the reopening of universities for in-person learning. Repression of university students and academics can hinder academic freedom, undermining teaching, learning, and an education system's capacity to deliver accurate and high-quality information.

- In Democratic Republic of Congo, police reportedly used teargas and live ammunition to disperse demonstrating students demanding an end to Covid-19 related closures of universities in Bukavu town, South Kivu province, on January 12, 2021.
- In Colombia, in April 2021, Mobile Anti-Disturbance Squadron (ESMAD) forces reportedly entered the University del Valle, in Valle del Cauca department, using teargas to forcibly remove students at a sit-in protesting the return to in-person classes during the pandemic.

Recommendations

To governments – include the following in statements at the Summit:

- Commit to ending attacks on education and the military use of schools and universities and mitigating their immediate and longer-term impacts on students and educators;
- Endorse and implement the [Safe Schools Declaration](#) in a gender-responsive way;
- Develop and adopt policies, legislation, and national plans that protect education during conflict and provide for the continuity of education, including higher education;
- Prioritize and finance the protection of higher education nationally and globally.

To Ministries of Defense and State Security Forces:

- Avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas, in line with the new [EWIPA Declaration](#), including near universities or along routes to or from them;
- Avoid using universities for military purposes; integrate the [Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict](#) into operational frameworks;
- Refrain from using excessive force or unnecessary lethal force on university students and personnel at protests that are either education-related or occur on campus.

To Ministries of Education and Higher Education:

- Ensure that the protection of higher education is budgeted into national education plans;
- Invest in and develop accessible online learning tools to facilitate the continuity of education.

