Vulnerable Students, Unsafe Schools

**Attacks and Military Use of Schools
in the Central African Republic**

> 66 We work in an atmosphere of worry all the time. This is why students don't return [to school]. We are not totally secure here [at school], anything can happen.[1] 99

The wave of violence beginning in December 2012 in the Central African Republic (CAR) has taken its toll on the country's fragile education system. According to an assessment released by the Education Cluster in April 2015, roughly 29.6 percent of the 335 schools surveyed were attacked and 8.4 percent were used by armed groups and international peacekeeping forces between 2012 and April 2015.[2] By February 2014, 65 percent of schools were closed.[3] Despite significant progress in reopening schools for the 2014-2015 academic year, armed groups continue to impede children's right to education by looting schools, threatening students and teachers, attacking areas without distinguishing schools, and contributing to an overall climate of insecurity. In 2014, the United Nations (UN) listed the ex-Séléka and associated armed groups in the Secretary-General's Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict for attacks on schools committed in CAR in 2013.[4] Along with international peacekeeping forces, armed groups have also used schools as lodging facilities and for various logistical and operational tasks.

Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (Watchlist) conducted a five-week research mission to CAR to investigate and shed light on the high number of attacks and military use of schools and to formulate recommendations to realize children's right to education.

The nature of the attacks on schools varies by prefecture, depending on the groups operating in the region and the level of active conflict. Although the intensity of the violence and number of reported attacks on schools has declined relative to the number of attacks that occurred between late 2012 and 2014, some schools still remain at risk of attack, particularly in areas of active conflict.

Photo:
School in the Central African Republic looted by civilians and possibly armed groups, as well as used by international peacekeeping forces in 2014.
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Diagram: CAR Education Cluster Map Showing Percentage of Schools Attacked by Prefecture

Cluster Education en République Centrafricaine, "Education Cluster Assessment on the State of Education in Central African Republic, End of the First Semester," April 2015, p. 26.
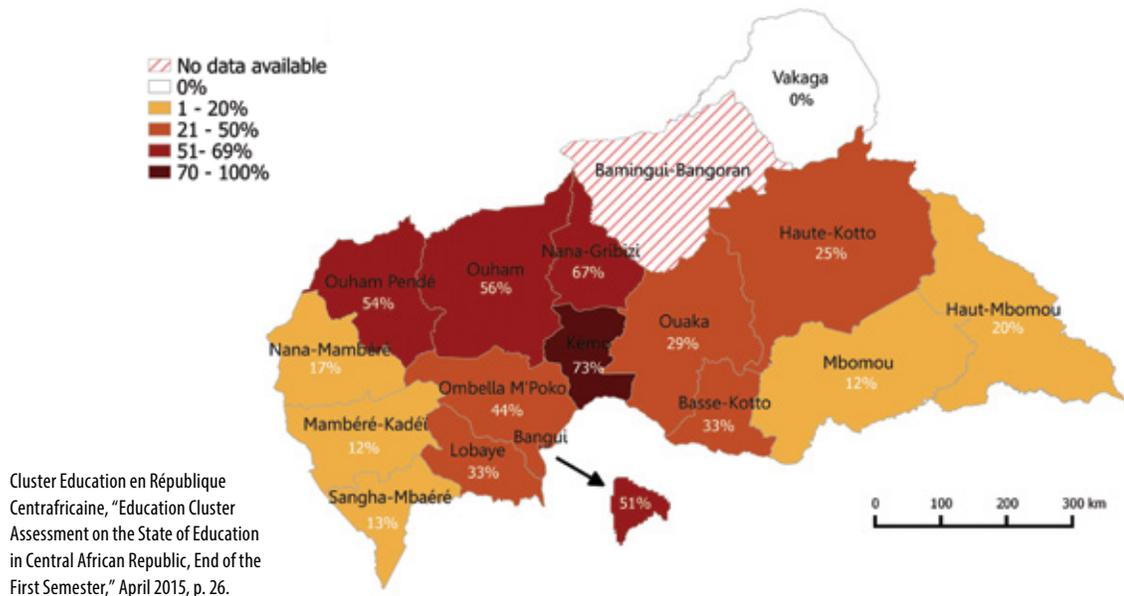
Most commonly, schools are looted by armed groups. They have stripped some schools bare, taking doors, desks, roofs, books, and office materials. In recent months, armed groups have targeted newly rehabilitated schools, in particular for food from feeding programs and for valuable education kits provided by humanitarian agencies.

In addition, armed groups and individuals using their status of association with armed groups have threatened and attacked students and teachers while en route to school or on school premises. Watchlist investigated cases of targeted threats against school directors for reopening schools or taking actions that interfered with an armed group's activities. Sometimes suspected armed group members, acting in their private capacity, threatened teachers for disciplining their relatives at school. In other cases, groups accused students and teachers, who cross areas controlled by different armed groups to attend school, of delivering information to an opposing group. In the most severe case researched by Watchlist, an armed group attacked peacekeeping troops stationed near a high school in Bangui where many students were allegedly used as human shields. Eighty students, below the age of 18, who were involved in the attack, were reportedly taken to medical facilities for treatment.

Since the beginning of the conflict in late 2012, armed groups and international forces have used schools as bases for their activities, contributing to significant damage to school property, exposing students and teachers to risk of attack, and limiting children's right to education.

Photo: School looted by an armed group in the Central African Republic over a five-month period. © 2015 Watchlist/Janine Morna.
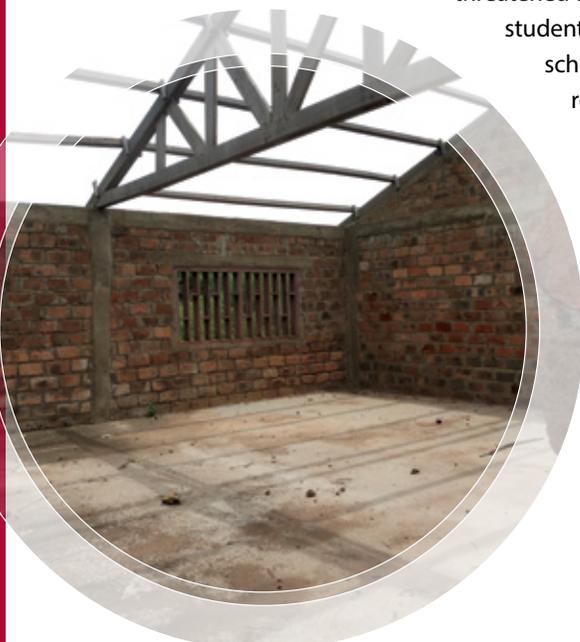
Both the ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka armed groups have used school facilities for their activities. Sometimes their presence in a town has prevented schools from opening altogether. Moreover, while the deployment of peacekeeping forces has helped to secure many areas, these troops have also used schools during their operations, contributing to the damage of school property.

In October 2014, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) based police officers at a school in Bangui to protect students, teachers, and the surrounding community, sparking debate among humanitarian and peacekeeping actors about the use of MINUSCA police officers in school protection.

Finally, ongoing fear of attacks has a chilling effect on children's right to education. Watchlist, for example, found that following the official reopening of schools in November 2014, Muslim students have not enrolled in school at the same rates as before the crisis. This is in part because the few Muslims remaining in CAR are sometimes too afraid to allow their children to leave their neighborhoods, even if there are no schooling options in these areas. For students and teachers who are able to return to school, rumors or threats of attacks hinder the frequency of attendance. Several unstable areas lack qualified teachers and schools outside of Bangui are largely reliant on maître-parents (volunteer teachers from the community).

In light of these challenges, the Transitional Government of CAR and the international community should take steps to strengthen the safety and security of the school environment.

The government should strengthen the existing legislative and judicial framework to hold perpetrators of attacks on schools accountable. The absence of the rule of law in many areas of CAR has led to high levels of impunity. In June 2015, the Transitional Government of CAR took its first important step towards improving protections for schools and universities by signing the Safe Schools Declaration and committing to implement the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict (Guidelines).[5] Following this endorsement, the government should consider banning the military use of schools or, at a minimum, incorporating the Guidelines into existing legislation and military doctrine, or enact new legislation or polices that implement the Guidelines. It should also ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, both of which offer various protections for children affected by conflict. To promote accountability for attacks on schools, the government, with the support of the international community, should take steps to strengthen the functioning of the judicial system, integrate

about watchlist

Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict strives to end violations against children in armed conflicts and to guarantee their rights. As a global network, Watchlist builds partnerships among local, national and international non-governmental organizations, enhancing mutual capacities and strengths. Working together, we strategically collect and disseminate information on violations against children in conflicts in order to influence key decision makers to create and implement programmes and policies that effectively protect children.

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the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Rome Statute) into its criminal code, and prosecute violators of the law in domestic courts and the Special Criminal Court (which will have jurisdiction to investigate crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide committed on CAR's territory since 2003).[6]

To ensure sustainable monitoring of attacks and military use of schools, the agencies implementing the UN-led Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) should formalize a system for receiving, verifying, and responding to alerts on attacks from education actors. The Transitional Government of CAR can also play a stronger role in monitoring attacks on schools, students, and teachers by rebuilding administrative offices so that government civil servants are able to carry out data collection, and by continuing to explore the use of EduTrac, an SMS system designed to receive real-time education data, for early warnings on attacks or military use of schools.

As part of humanitarian efforts to restore education, UN and non-UN actors, including donors, should develop activities that respond to the insecurity that persists within and around schools. This includes improving security surrounding schools through active peacekeeping patrols in areas where schools have been threatened or attacked and strengthening the physical security of the school premises. To mitigate the dangers facing children en route to school, educators and humanitarians should organize children to walk to school in small groups, possibly carrying whistles for protection. Several interviewees also called for the need to develop emergency preparedness plans and safety drills with parents, so parties know what action to take in the event of an attack. In addition, some interviewees called on the need for students and teachers, with the support of child protection networks and volunteers, to develop tools to address challenging psychological problems.

The UN can support these efforts by ensuring peacekeeping forces receive comprehensive pre-deployment and in-theater training on the protection and rights of children, in accordance with Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) Specialised Training Materials on Child Protection, and develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) recalling and outlining peacekeeping obligations in relation to child protection. They should also raise awareness and sensitize armed groups on attacks and military use of schools and endeavor to secure commitments from armed groups to halt and prevent these violations and abuses. The UN should also rehabilitate schools used by MINUSCA forces and recommend individuals who carry out persistent attacks on schools for sanctions through its regime mandated by Resolution 2127.

Ensuring children's right to education is a fundamental step in the country's transition to peace and in preventing the resurgence of violence in the future.

Photo: Girl in the Central African Republic.
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Key Recommendations

Transitional Government of the Central African Republic

- **Ratify** the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

- **Fully integrate the provisions of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court** (Rome Statute) in national criminal law to enable domestic prosecutions, including at the Special Criminal Court, of individuals who deliberately attack buildings dedicated to education, provided they are not a military objective, during periods of non-international armed conflict.

- **Ban any military use of schools or, at a minimum, incorporate the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict into the new legal code for the protection of children,** or in new legislation or polices. Review and amend the current military training manuals, military law manuals, field manuals, and disciplinary regulations, to reflect the provisions in the Guidelines, disseminate these manuals among the national forces, and incorporate the new provisions into systematic training of armed forces on child protection.

- **Convene relevant stakeholders to begin discussions on the implementation of the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict and the Safe Schools Declaration.** Possible next steps may include:

  - Identifying and responding to gaps in policy, **practice, and response** programming related to the safety of the school environment.

  - Developing a national **awareness-raising campaign** on the Guidelines and attacks on schools more broadly through, for example, brochures, posters, and radio programs.

  - Refining systems for ongoing, disaggregated **data collection** on attacks and military use of schools, including through EduTrac, to collect preliminary information on these incidents.

- **With the support of relevant stakeholders, take steps to restore the judicial system, investigate allegations of attacks on schools** in violation of applicable national and international law, and hold perpetrators accountable through **disciplinary sanctions and transparent prosecutions in domestic courts and the Special Criminal Court.**

Non-State Armed Groups

- **Immediately halt and prevent attacks or threats of attacks** on schools and attacks and threats of attacks against related protected persons.

- **Immediately evacuate all personnel within schools**, as well as military installations, check points, or storage facilities in the vicinity of schools.

- **Ban any military use of schools or, at a minimum, incorporate the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict** into command and control mechanisms.

- **Issue** and widely **disseminate a military order to all troops under the command and control structure** on the protection afforded to schools and protected personnel.

- **Investigate incidents of attacks** on schools and related protected persons, as well as military use of schools, in breach of applicable international law or military orders. Take steps internally to ensure accountability for perpetrators and commanders.

Photo: School in the Central African Republic looted by civilians and possibly armed groups, as well as used by international peacekeeping forces in 2014.
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- If listed for attacks on schools and hospitals, **sign commitments** with the UN to stop and prevent attacks on schools and related personnel and share verifiable information on implementation.

UN Secretary-General and his Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict

- Encourage the investigation of attacks on schools by anti-Balaka forces and **consider listing at least the anti-Balaka faction** that attacked Lycée Boganda (a high school in Bangui) in June 2015 for attacks on schools, as well as other anti-Balaka factions which have perpetrated these attacks, in the 2016 Secretary-General's Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict.

  - Encourage the **Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR) to continue monitoring and reporting on attacks on schools**.

  - **Highlight ongoing threats to education and develop recommendations for monitoring, preventing, and responding to this violation** in the Secretary-General's Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict in CAR. Use the report to also call on the Transitional Government of CAR to **implement the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict** through legislative reform and convening stakeholders to strategize on implementation activities.

UN Security Council and its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict

- Use the **upcoming consultations** on the implementation of Security Council Resolution 2217, renewing MINUSCA's mandate, to urge MINUSCA to include **attacks or threats of attacks on schools in its protection of civilians assessment** determining where to send patrols.

- Use the occasion of the upcoming release of the **Secretary-General's Report on Children and Armed Conflict in CAR** to call for concrete steps to **halt**, **prevent, and respond to attacks on schools and to reduce the military use of schools** through the implementation and widespread dissemination of the Guidelines.

- Urge Member States to **designate individuals** and entities which commit grave violations against children, **particularly attacks on schools,** and encourage the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to continue to share information with the **Sanctions Committee and the Panel of Experts** on the responsible parties.

United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA)

- **Ensure peacekeeping forces receive comprehensive pre-deployment and in-theater training on the protection and rights of children**, in accordance with DPKO Specialised Training Materials on Child Protection for UN Peacekeepers. **Allocate funding to support the logistics for in-theater training and consider hiring a full-time mobile training officer** to conduct child protection trainings in areas where troops are deployed.

- Develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) outlining **measures to protect children and schools**. Ensure the SOPs are integrated into the overall planning, preparation, and conduct of operations.

- Include **attacks or threats of attacks on schools in the protection of civilians assessment** determining

Photo: School North-East from Ouham Pende.
© 2007 Pierre Holtz/OCHA.

where to send patrols. Peacekeepers, however, should maintain some distance from the school campus to ensure they do not inadvertently endanger teachers and students.

- **Station MINUSCA police officers** who are currently based in école Koudoukou (a school in Bangui), in **accommodations near the school instead** of within the school's premises. Officers should continue actively patrolling in the vicinity of the school and neighboring internally displaced community from this new base.

- Ensure resources allocated for social programs include funding for the **rehabilitation of schools used by MINUSCA troops**.

French Government

- **Sign the Safe Schools Declaration**, endorsing the Guidelines for the Protection of Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.

- Help to **rehabilitate schools used by Opération Sangaris forces**.

African Union (AU)

- **Develop a directive adopting the same guidelines outlined in the UN Infantry Battalion Manual (Volume 2.13)**, also referenced in the DPKO Specialised Training Materials on Child Protection for UN Peacekeepers, **prohibiting the military use of schools by AU troops**. Take steps to raise awareness of the directive **among Member States in anticipation of future AU peace operations** and devise strategies to monitor this practice and, where necessary, impose appropriate disciplinary sanctions for violating the directive.

Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR)

- Strengthen **coordination and collaboration between the MRM and the Education Cluster** by:

- Arranging for the MRM technical team to carry out **periodic, contextualized trainings on attacks and military use of schools for cluster members**, including for members of the Education Sub-Cluster at the prefectural level.

- Defining **key terms in the current conflict context,** establishing **a format for NGO alerts** on attacks to the Education Cluster, and identifying roles and responsibilities regarding possible verification, follow-up, response, and feedback on alerts.

- Continuing to collaborate with the Education Cluster, including through encouraging the participation of one of the **co-leads from the Education Cluster in the MRM Technical Working Group** to enhance information exchange and coordinate response.

- **Raise awareness among armed groups about attacks and military use of schools** during ongoing discussions with armed group leaders.

- **Accelerate efforts to negotiate commitments from armed groups on attacks and military use of schools.** Given the large number of shifting armed groups in CAR, consider an alternative to action plans by **engaging with individual commanders "one-by-one" at the local level** to build trust and pave the way for introducing child protection principles.

- Support government efforts to **implement the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.**

Education and Child Protection Actors

- Ensure education programming includes **strategies to increase the safety and security of schools, teachers, and students**. This may include:

  - **Improving the physical infrastructure** of schools through building walls around the perimeter of the schools, installing security bars across windows, and providing locks for classroom and office doors.

Photo: CAR, Children in Ghost Town.
© 2007 UNICEF/Pierre Holtz.

- Hiring **civilian guards** to protect schools, **or building directors' and teachers' quarters on school premises**, provided it does not expose them to unnecessary risk, to deter theft.

- Organizing students, in collaboration with parents, **to travel to school in small groups**.

- **Developing emergency preparedness plans** in close consultation with parents and child protection networks in the community.

- Integrating child protection programming into education programming, particularly to address **children's psychological needs** and helping to promote the perception of school as a safe place.

- **Support the return of Muslim students to schools.** Consider devising temporary distance learning programs for children in these groups who cannot access schools for security reasons.

- Encourage the **mobilization of qualified teachers** to areas outside of Bangui and support volunteer teachers from the community—maître-parents—with, for example, **food rations, stipends, and income-generating activities**.

- Ensure the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), as the co-lead for the Education Cluster, **invests in sustained leadership and engagement on attacks and military use of schools**.

- Support government efforts to **implement the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict**.

International Criminal Court (ICC)

- As part of ongoing investigations, consider the **prosecution of individuals who deliberately carry out attacks on buildings dedicated** to education, provided they are not a military objective, in contravention to the Rome Statute.

Donors

- **Develop donor policy frameworks** that ensure predictable, consistent, and transparent support for quality education in emergencies.

- Ensure projects supporting the restoration of the education system in CAR include a component to **strengthen the safety of schools, students, and teachers** through, for example, the strategies outlined for education and child protection actors.

- Call on the Transitional Government of CAR to, at a minimum, **implement the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict** through legislative reform and convening relevant stakeholders to strategize on implementation activities.

Endnotes

1   Watchlist interview (names and location withheld), two education personnel, May 8, 2015.

2   Cluster Education en République Centrafricaine, "Education Cluster Assessment on the State of Education in Central African Republic, End of the First Semester," April 2015, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/fr/system/files/documents/files/car_ec_-_assessment_report_on_the_state_of_education_-_2015-04_2.pdf (accessed June 30, 2015), p. 25. According to the assessment, 38 percent of the schools surveyed were attacked and/or used by armed groups and/or military forces. Of this group, 22 percent of the schools were used by armed groups and/or military forces.

3   Ibid., p. 7.

4   UN Security Council, Report of the UN Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict (A/68/878–S/2014/339), May 15, 2014, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/68/878&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC (accessed July 1, 2015), Annex I.

5   For more information on the Safe Schools Declaration and the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict, please see "Safe Schools Declaration Endorsements," Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), accessed June 29, 2015, http://www.protectingeducation.org/guidelines/support.

6   "Parliament of the Central African Republic Adopts the Law Establishing a Special Criminal Court," Parliamentarians for Global Action, accessed June 30, 2015, http://www.pgaction.org/car-centralafricanrepublic-criminalcourt.html.