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# Press Conference

**Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York**  
**PRESS CONFERENCE TO LAUNCH NEW GLOBAL STUDY 'EDUCATION UNDER ATTACK'**

The rights of children to education were being denied as a result of targeted violence in many countries around the world, Mark Richmond, of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), said at Headquarters today.

At a press conference to launch *Education under Attack*, a new global study commissioned by UNESCO, Mr. Richmond, the agency's Director for the Coordination of United Nations Priorities in Education, said it examined how education and educationists in many parts of the world had become victims of concerted, deliberate attacks, including killings, torture and the bombing of schools.

Accompanied by Brendan O'Malley, author of the study, Mr. Richmond said such violence had been carried out against teachers, university professors, whole education systems and specific schools. The study highlighted Iraq and Afghanistan but it also covered many other countries. Although it did not seem to suggest a global trend, there was an increasing tendency towards that kind of violence.

Mr. O'Malley said the study was a global one about physical and military violence against education, including attacks on staff, students, teachers, union officials, Government officials and institutions. It included people as well as buildings and local authorities and covered the whole range of attacks in many parts of the world, from multiple deaths resulting from bombings and gunfire to targeted assassinations, destruction or armed occupation of school buildings, illegal detentions and torture, forced and voluntary recruitment of child soldiers, rape by armed forces and threats.

According to the study, there appeared to have been no similar previous work on the subject and attacks seemed to have increased dramatically in the last three years, he continued. The worst-affected countries in the survey period from 1997 to 2007 were Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq, Nepal, the Palestinian Territory, Thailand and Zimbabwe, according to data based on incidents reported by the media and ministries of education

worldwide. It was possible, therefore, that there were some incidents that had not been reported and some areas from which nothing had been heard. The study showed the need for an open global database in order to paint an accurate picture of what was going on in the world. That would help to determine, among other things, the number of attackers, who was getting killed and what motivated the attackers, in order to monitor the situation and raise awareness.

On actual reported incidents, Mr. O'Malley said that in Iraq 280 academics had been killed in a campaign of liquidation between the fall of Saddam Hussein and April 2007. In Afghanistan, 190 bombing, arson and missile attacks on education targets had occurred between 2005 and 2006. In Colombia, 310 teachers had been murdered since 2000 while in the four-year period between 2002 and 2006, Nepal had seen more than 10,000 teachers and 22,000 students abducted and 734 teachers and 1,730 students arrested or tortured. In Myanmar, some 70,000 minors, including some 11-year-olds, had been enlisted in 2000, many of them in the national army.

Apart from the moral argument about the need to save lives, the situation had an impact on the worldwide drive to provide education for all, he continued. About 40 per cent of the 77 million children who were not in school lived in conflict-affected areas and those worst-affected by attacks, where the impact on education was devastating. In Iraq, for instance, the education system was virtually at the point of collapse. Last year, 30 per cent of pupils had attended classes compared to 70 per cent the year before, and university attendance was down by up to 60 per cent in many departments. In Afghanistan last year, 100,000 children who had been attending school the year before were no longer doing so, and in Thailand, teachers were being assassinated in the country's troubled southern provinces.

He said 100 to 1,000 schools closed for a week at a time every time a teacher was shot in that region. The psychological impact as well as the impact on the pupils was immeasurable. For instance, there had been terrible atrocities in Thailand with teachers being shot and burned in front of their pupils. In Baghdad last November, one teacher had been raped and mutilated and her body left to hang outside the school for days. In Nepal, there had been instances of head teachers being beheaded after being accused by Maoist guerrillas of cooperating with the Government. The problem was extensive and its impact on children could not be measured at present.

The report looked at different types of responses, including physical protection by guards and troop presence, he said. The Thai Government had done quite a lot along those lines but that approach did not seem to have deterred the attackers, who had responded by using bombs with greater explosive power to blow up even the soldiers. In Afghanistan, where guards could not be provided for schools, there had been efforts to mobilize communities to demonstrate how much they valued education by posting their own guards to deter attacks or even to confront attackers. There were also efforts to persuade religious leaders to emphasize the value of education so as to reduce the likelihood of attack.

Another idea was to promote resilience which, in a place like Afghanistan, had meant relocating schools from easily targeted large buildings into the homes of villagers, where they could not be seen by the enemy. Distance learning was also provided by exiled academics.

Mr. O'Malley said the study looked at how the international community could work towards ending impunity for attacks. At the moment, there was a problem because nobody was charged, investigated or held to account for the attacks. That could be tackled through the carrot of conditionality in aid and trade deals and by widening the application and use of human rights instruments, an approach which, however, could only work if it was supported by an international solidarity campaign to raise the issue.

He went on to say that the establishment of the Office of the Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict in 1997 had been the start of much progress, particularly on the issue of child soldiers. The establishment of the International Criminal Court had also added some weight by making it a war crime to recruit child soldiers under the age of 15 and intentionally to attack schools. It was important to ensure that people were aware of those institutions and that some muscle had been put behind the International Criminal Court so that people were actually held to account.

People often assumed that education was “neutral” in a conflict, but the study had shown that in certain cases, education actually aggravated the conflict, he continued. Further research was needed to determine whether attackers targeted schools because they were “soft” targets or because they were symbols of the power they opposed. It was also necessary to determine whether the education system itself aggravated inequalities or grievances.

He said there was already a blueprint for making education work for peace in conflict situations. UNESCO's 1996 recommendations suggested that schools should promote inclusion, tolerance, transparency, cross-cultural understanding, sensitivity to culture and language, conflict resolution and inquiry-based history. Many of those things had been tried quite successfully in Northern Ireland. It was possible, therefore, to work toward a situation where schools could one day be recognized as zones of peace and become sanctuaries in the same way that churches had been in centuries past. One suggestion had been to create a symbol in recognition of that status, as had been done by the Red Cross. A competition could be held to create such a symbol. In Colombia, the teachers' union had mounted a campaign to have schools treated as neutral zones.

The report concluded that education should be for all and not just for those who were easily reached, he said. There was an urgent need for collective action to that end. It should include human rights campaigns to set up a global database on education attacks in order to end impunity and work toward acceptance of schools as safe sanctuaries and zones of peace.

In response a reporter's question, Mr. O'Malley said more research was needed into the kind of preventive measures that had been taken to determine what had worked and what had not. Education was necessary even during conflict because it was a tool for life and not much progress could be made without it. If children were not educated during a conflict, it became a massive task to get a country back on its feet after the conflict, as was being seen in Afghanistan today.

He added that the study had not gone into great detail about Africa because the worst-affected countries during the decade covered had not been African. The situation might have been different during the preceding decade, when there had been wars in West Africa.

Returning to Afghanistan, he said there had been a massive campaign to get children back into school following the fall of the Taliban, with an emphasis on enrolling girls. However, gender balance had not yet been achieved. Part of the problem was not that people did not want their children to attend school, but that school was not safe in many cases. Besides attacks, there was the question of the distance they had to walk to school.

Mr. O'Malley added that the study did not cover attacks where neither physical nor military motives could be attributed, such as the Columbine attack in the United States or other attacks by students. It used whatever information was available but did not cover every country. It found that attacks were most likely in conflict areas, even if such a conflict was undeclared. Teachers in Colombia, especially those active in trade unions, were often caught between Government- backed paramilitaries and left-wing guerrillas.

Responding to another journalist's question, Mr. Richmond said a new UNESCO report was due soon with regard to realizing the Millennium Development Goal on education by 2015. The signs were both good and bad as there had been progress and lack of progress. The case was made that so much could be done if Governments and other stakeholders mobilized behind education. The lack of action could be explained by many factors, including entrenched poverty and problems of access, among others. Currently, many children went to school and came out of school with very limited knowledge. Thus, just getting kids in school was not enough. UNESCO was, therefore, pushing that education for all should not just be about education but about quality education.

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