

ARSON ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS IN THE SAHEL

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE THROUGH PREVENTION, MITIGATION AND EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

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Violent attacks on schools are a security risk that adversely affect education outcomes by putting teachers and students at risk and damaging or destroying education infrastructure. In particular, arson attacks on schools create insecurity that affects children’s learning, often with lifelong consequences. Aid agencies and donors that support education in conflict-affected communities need to address security risk management with partners providing education in conflict-affected areas

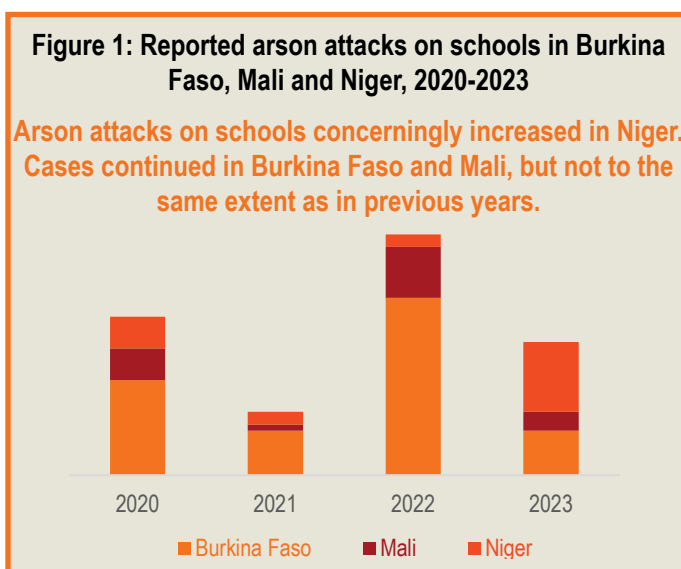
To support the strengthening of security risk management programmes to improve aid outcomes and ensure the safety of aid workers and infrastructure, Insecurity Insight is monitoring violence that affects aid operations in conflict-affected areas. This brief highlights incidents involving arson attacks on schools in the Sahel region and suggests measures for NGO advocacy and security risk management to address the issue. The suggested measures focus on the roles of schools exposed to this violence and options for aid agencies and donors who support education in conflict-affected areas.

Number of recorded arson attacks on schools in 2023		
Niger	Burkina Faso	Mali
11	8	3
Source: 2020-2023 Arson Attacks on Schools in the Sahel Incident Data		

The Safe Schools Declaration outlines a set of commitments to strengthen the protection of education from attack and restricts the use of schools and universities for military purposes. It seeks to ensure the continuity of safe education during armed conflict.

Insecurity Insight identified 22 arson attacks on schools in Burkina, Mali and Niger in 2023. The actual number of incidents and the severity of the problem are likely much greater because of probable under-reporting. These attacks severely impact access to education, deprive children of their right to education and have devastating long-term consequences for development goals.

The number of reported arson attacks on schools dramatically increased in Niger, from one incident in 2022 to 11 in 2023. Cases continued to be reported from in Burkina Faso and Mali, but not to the same extent as in previous years. In Burkina Faso, arson attacks occurred in the five regions of Boucle du Mouhoun, Centre-Est, Centre-Nord, Est and Sahel, while most arson attacks on schools in Niger were recorded in the Tillabéri region bordering north-eastern Burkina Faso. Arson attacks in Mali were recorded in Kidal and Mopti regions.



Map 1: Reported arson attacks on schools in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, 2020-2023

Arson attacks have been a risk to schools across wide areas for several years.



Source: Insecurity Insight. Base map data source: OpenMapTiles.org

Nearly half of reported school arson attacks were attributed to Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin fighters, who have perpetrated such violence as part of their opposition to education they regard as “Western”. Two incidents were attributed to Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) in Niger, while in Mali the attackers were not identified. Three school arson attacks took place during wider attacks on civilians in Burkina Faso and Mali. ISSP fighters set a school on fire during armed clashes with Nigerien armed forces in Niger's Tillabéri region. The motivations for other attacks are unclear. In most arson attacks, teachers and students were not present. This reduces the immediate risk to teachers and students from such attacks, but suggests that the perpetrators aimed to intimidate and threaten teachers and educational providers and force them to stop teaching.

IMPACT OF ARSON ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS

Arson attacks carried out by non-state armed groups on schools and universities have profound impacts, depriving students of education and destroying facilities. Beyond the immediate physical destruction of educational infrastructure, these acts create deep-rooted fear among students and educators, often forcing prolonged closures that deny children and university students access to education. These attacks destabilise communities by eroding trust in the safety and security of education systems, exacerbating educational inequality, and hindering socio-economic progress. The long-term consequences include disrupted academic years, the loss of educational resources, and long-lasting psychological trauma among those affected.

Arson attacks are often used by armed groups to oppose school curriculums, prevent efforts to ensure student gender equality, prevent particular ethnicities from being educated, and intimidate communities, often resulting in school closures or families withdrawing their children from school. They also disrupt democratic processes by targeting schools used as polling stations and endanger schools repurposed as shelters or military outposts. Arson attacks remain a security risk for teachers and students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively protect educational staff and students, ensure uninterrupted learning, and mitigate the risks associated with arson attacks on schools, education programmes need to design and implement appropriate security risk management strategies that address violence against schools in whatever form, including arson.

Security risk management strategies to prevent arson attacks are implemented in partnerships involving schools, communities, and aid organisations supporting education, with support from donors, governments, and other authorities. The specific roles of each of these stakeholders are discussed below, based on the four principles of awareness, preparedness, response and the sustainability of educational services given in the SR4H cycle (see Figure 2).



Table 2: Strategies to address the looting of medical supplies	
Security risk management approaches Schools are best protected by focusing on four key processes	Security risk management strategies The key functions of these strategies are as follows
Prevention/protection Protecting schools by implementing an acceptance strategy to reduce the likelihood of schools being targeted	<p>Raising local awareness through targeted advocacy campaigns and early warning systems</p> <p>Using humanitarian diplomacy (where possible) to engage with the non-state actors known to attack schools</p> <p>Collecting and using data to advocate for better protection and preparedness</p>
Preparedness Putting in place measures to prepare the school, administrators and staff for an emergency	<p>Educating school personnel to recognise and threats and respond appropriately to them during emergencies</p> <p>Developing response and emergency plans focusing on emergency contacts, first aid kits, evacuation routes and structures to support affected schools</p>
Response Ensuring that the response during an emergency is adequate	Developing response plans that identify priorities, responsibilities and procedures
Sustainability putting in place measures to ensure that children continue to have access to learning even in the aftermath of an attack on a school	<p>Developing and supporting plans for alternative locations for schooling</p> <p>Providing psychological support for affected communities</p> <p>Working towards rebuilding the school if it has been damaged or destroyed</p>



AWARENESS

Community/school:

- **Advocacy messages:** Raise awareness among local communities and schools about the Safer Schools Declaration and Geneva Call principles to protect educational facilities.
- **Awareness raising:** Collaborate with local edited media and social media networks to publish or broadcast messages on the importance of safeguarding schools.
- **Data monitoring:** Establish a reliable system to monitor and report arson incidents affecting schools by working closely with local authorities to collect accurate data and encouraging teachers and schools to report incidents.

NGOs supporting education:

- **Advocacy campaigns:** Develop advocacy campaigns focusing on protective measures for schools that align with international norms.
- **Workshops and training:** Conduct training sessions for school staff on risk assessment and emergency preparedness.

Donors/governments and INGOs:

- **Funding awareness programmes:** Allocate funds to support awareness programmes emphasising the protection of educational institutions.
- **Support data utilisation:** Fund initiatives to monitor threats and improve security measures at schools by using data-driven approaches.

Humanitarian diplomacy:

- **Engagement with non-state actors known to attack schools:** Advocate with local and international stakeholders to uphold international norms safeguarding schools from attacks.



PREPAREDNESS

Community/school:

- **Safety drills:** Implement regular safety drills and training sessions for students and staff to respond effectively to emergencies.
- **Emergency plans:** Develop and practise comprehensive emergency response plans tailored to different attack scenarios. Encourage other schools in your area (or country) to share best practices in emergency plans.
- **Infrastructure improvement:** Invest in fire-resistant building materials and technologies for school construction and renovations.

Basic procedures and programmes	
Fire and arson preparedness:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that all buildings in your compound are equipped with fire alarms and firefighting equipment. • Fire extinguishers should be available inside the building and fire buckets filled with water or sand placed outside it. • Ensure that all personnel are trained to use this equipment. • Fuel must be stored away from buildings and vehicles. • Store all flammable materials such as vehicle and generator fuel/gas bottles in a locked and well-ventilated building. • Have a fire evacuation plan, evacuation signs, fire wardens, and regular fire drills.
Emergency contacts:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that you have a list of emergency contacts immediately available, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police • Fire brigade • Quick reaction force of the security company your organisation employs (where one is contracted) • Ambulance services • Community leaders • Religious leaders • Media • Appoint a senior person to contact the relevant emergency contacts as soon as an emergency occurs. • Especially community and religious leaders should be asked to calm down angry crowds. • It helps to build a strong relationship with these contacts before an incident occurs to ensure that they respond quickly and appropriately in the event of an emergency. • The process of actor mapping will help to identify who should be the priority points of contact and influence.
Escape routes and procedures:	<p>Ensure that alternative escape routes are identified and are physically accessible to staff and students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that everyone in a school or educational compound participates in evacuation drills on a quarterly basis. • Pre-identify safe “MOVE TO” areas where staff and students should gather in an emergency.

NGOs supporting education:

- Emergency planning assistance: Provide technical support to schools to develop and test emergency plans and share best practice among different schools.
- Capacity-building: Facilitate partnerships with crisis management experts to improve school preparedness.

Donors/governments and INGOs:

- Capacity-building grants: Allocate grants to assist schools to increase their capacity to prepare for and respond to emergencies.
- Infrastructure support: Fund the installation of fire-suppression systems and other security improvements in vulnerable schools.

Humanitarian diplomacy:

- Advocacy for protection commitments: Advocate for commitments from all conflict parties to protect schools from being targeted.



RESPONSE TO ARSON ATTACKS

Community/school:

- Emergency protocols: Establish clear protocols for immediate evacuation and communication during arson attacks on schools.
- Communication channels: Develop efficient communication channels with local agencies and nearby schools to ensure coordinated responses.
- Mutual aid networks: Foster collaboration among neighbouring schools to provide mutual support during emergencies.

NGOs supporting education:

- Rapid response: Ensure your organisation's readiness to deploy emergency support and resources promptly to affected schools.
- Centralised incident database: Establish a centralised database to track incidents.
- Coordinated response: Facilitate coordinated responses among partner schools.

Donors/governments and INGOs:

- Immediate response funding: Ensure that funds and resources are available to rapidly assist targeted schools after an incident.
- Humanitarian coordination: Coordinate international efforts to respond effectively to attacks on educational institutions.



SUSTAINING EDUCATION IN THE AFTERMATH OF AN ATTACK

Community/school:

- Continuity planning: Develop strategies to ensure that education will continue in alternative settings if schools are attacked.
- Psychological support: Provide ongoing counselling and support services for students and staff affected by violent attacks.
- Engagement and dialogue: Ask influential community leaders to participate in dialogue with armed groups to encourage them to refrain from targeting schools.

NGOs supporting education:

- Resilience building: Help schools to build resilience against future attacks through ongoing training and capacity-building.
- Partnerships for recovery: Forge partnerships with local organisations to replace damaged materials or structures and support educational recovery.

Donors/governments and INGOs:

- Infrastructure rebuilding: Fund initiatives to rebuild and strengthen educational infrastructure after an attack.
- Legal framework: Advocate for and support legal measures imposing penalties for attacks on educational facilities.
- De-politicising education: Take steps to ensure that education is not political or religious, particularly when in a conflict-affected setting.
- Appropriate use of schools: Ensure that governments and militaries do not use schools for military purposes.

Humanitarian diplomacy:

- Policy advocacy: Continue advocating for international support and policies protecting schools from attack.
- Awareness: Continue taking steps to raise awareness and hold perpetrators accountable on the international stage.

THE LOOTING OF HEALTH SUPPLIES IN THE SAHEL

The looting and destruction of medicine and other health supplies reduce the efficiency of the health care system and often put health workers at risk when they are unable to provide the medication people need. To support the strengthening of security risk management programmes to improve aid outcomes and ensure the safety of health care workers and infrastructure, Insecurity Insight is monitoring violence that affects aid operations in conflict-affected areas. This [brief](#) highlights incidents in which medical supplies were looted and destroyed across the Sahel region and suggests measures for NGO advocacy and security risk management measures to address the issue. The suggested measures focus on the roles of frontline health care providers and options for aid agencies and donors who support health care in conflict-affected areas.

As an H2H (humanitarian-to-humanitarian) association, Insecurity Insight supports the work of aid agencies; the providers of health-care, education, and protection services; and other civil society organisations by providing publicly available information that humanitarian organisations can use to design evidence-based policies. We collect and analyse data about violence against civilians and damage and destruction of vital civilian infrastructure in order to strengthen civilian protection and the delivery of aid in armed conflict. This document is funded and supported by the European Union. The opinions expressed in it do not reflect in any way the position of the EU who is not responsible for the content expressed in this document.

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