

THE LOOTING OF HEALTH SUPPLIES IN THE SAHEL

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE THROUGH PREVENTION, MITIGATION AND EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

July 2024



LOOTING OF HEALTH SUPPLIES ACROSS 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. Aid agencies and donors that support the provision of health care programmes in conflict-affected areas need to address security risk management with partners to prevent and mitigate the loss of medication.

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.

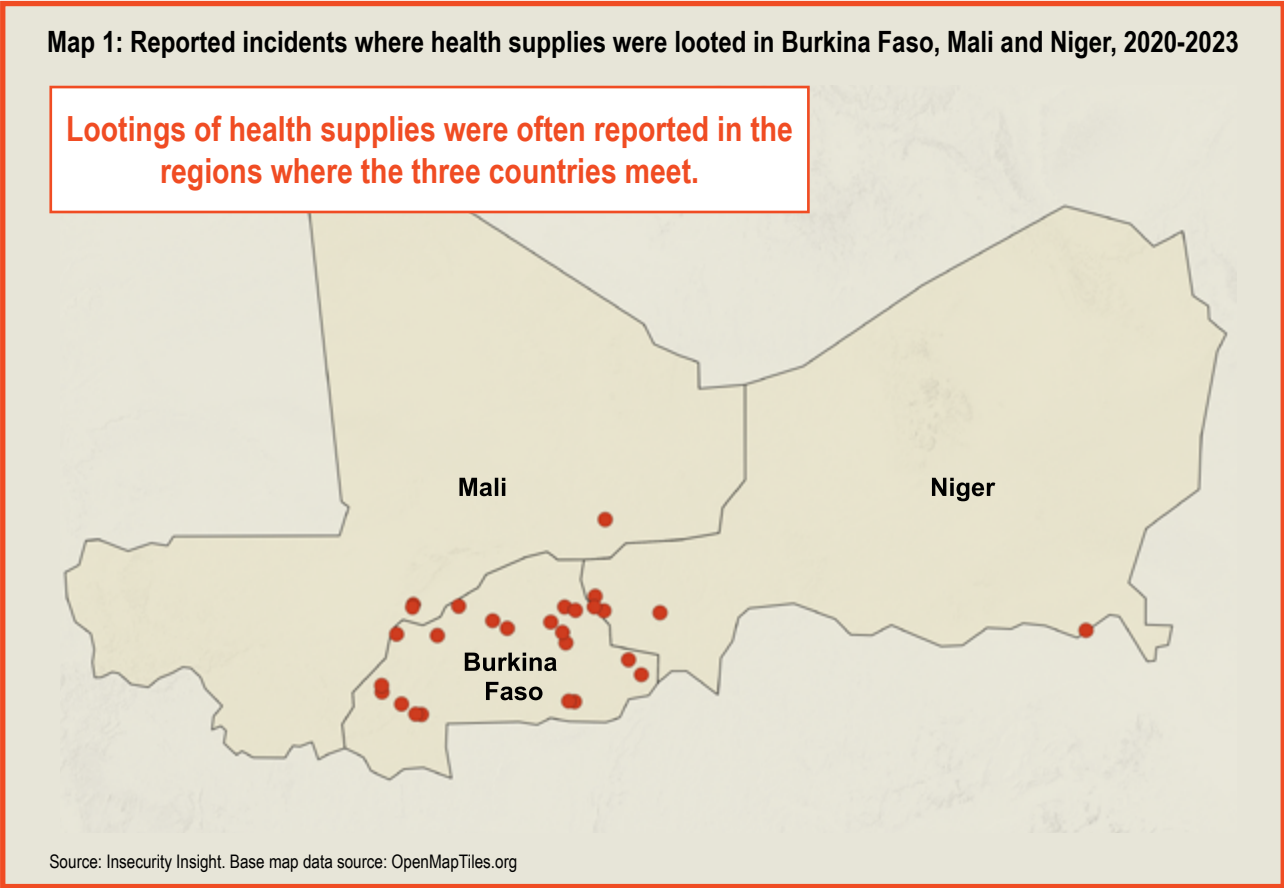
Incidents in which health supplies were looted in 2023		
Burkina Faso	Niger	Mali
20	5	3
Source: 2020-2023 Looting of Health Supplies Across the Sahel Incident Data		

Insecurity Insight identified at least 28 incidents in which vital medicine and equipment were looted, stolen or seized in [Burkina Faso](#), [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. The looting of medical supplies severely impacts health care, depriving patients of treatment for injuries, diseases and malnutrition. Children, pregnant women and those with chronic conditions suffer the most. Additionally, health workers face risks from agitated or distressed patients who are unable to access the medicine they need.

As in [previous years](#), high numbers of incidents in which health supplies were looted were recorded in Burkina Faso in 2023. They also continued to be reported from Niger, but fewer cases were reported there than in Mali. Lootings are particularly common in the border regions where these three countries meet, which are increasingly affected by armed conflict.

- In Burkina Faso, medicine lootings were reported from western Hauts-Bassins and Est regions bordering southern Niger.
- Most lootings in Niger were recorded in the Tillabéri region bordering north-eastern Burkina Faso and southern Mali, with one in the country’s south-eastern Diffa region.
- Lootings in Mali were recorded in Gao and Mopti regions.





The looting of medicine was frequently attributed to Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) fighters, particularly in Burkina Faso. Six incidents were attributed to Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), with half recorded in Niger’s Tillabéri region. Africa Corps (the former Wagner Group) and Mali Armed Forces (FAMa) personnel reportedly stole medicine from a health centre as part of a wider attack on a village in Mali’s Mopti region, while Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) fighters armed with guns stole medical supplies from a health centre in Niger’s Diffa region in a night attack. In the remaining lootings, the attackers were not identified.

Table 1: Reported perpetrators of incidents in which health supplies were looted in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, 2023

	Burkina Faso	Mali	Niger
JNIM	17	1	1
ISSP	2	1	3
ISWAP	–	–	1
Africa Corps and FAMa	–	1	–
	19	3	5

[Access the data on HDX](#)

Most lootings took place at health centres, pharmacies and medical warehouses. Medicine was stolen twice from health workers during road travel in Burkina Faso. In one of these incidents, two NGO drivers were kidnapped by JNIM fighters, who stole their vehicles and medicine. Both staff members were later released. In the majority of lootings, health workers were not present, suggesting that access to health supplies was an important motivation behind these incidents. Six lootings took place during wider attacks on civilians, including all five incidents in Niger and the previously mentioned incident involving Africa Corps and FAMa in Mali.

Health facilities were looted then set on fire four times by JNIM fighters in Burkina Faso. On at least one occasion, JNIM fighters in that country looted medical supplies that they reportedly used to repurpose a school as a health care centre.

THE IMPACTS OF ATTACKS ON HEALTH CARE

In Mali, some areas under the control of non-state armed groups experienced partial or total blockades that prevented goods and basic necessities from entering by road, river and air. The population of Tombouctou city was cut off from basic services and the city and surrounding areas were almost inaccessible, forcing NGOs in the area to restrict movement and activities and causing shortages of medicine, logistic equipment, and fuel. The looting of health supplies further reduces patients' access to vital treatment.

In the data collection process in Niger undertaken between January and July 2023, among the 5% of health service delivery units reported as partially or wholly inaccessible, a lack of medical supplies was mentioned in 16% of cases. It is possible that in some instances, incidents of looting contributed to medical supply shortages.

2023 ATTACKS ON HEALTH CARE IN WAR ZONES MOST EVER DOCUMENTED

The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition (SHCC) identified 2562 incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care in conflicts in 2023, a 25% increase from 2022, representing 500 more attacks than documented last year, and the highest ever since the Coalition began reporting. In its 11th annual report, Critical Condition: Violence Against Health Care in Conflict, the coalition documented arrests, kidnappings, and killings of health workers and damage to or destruction of health facilities in conflicts across 30 countries, or regions within countries, or territories.

There was intense violence against health care in new conflicts in Gaza and Sudan and continuing violence in Myanmar, Ukraine, and Haiti. Health facilities, transports, and patient access to care were also at high risk in the Sahel.

You can download the data on the Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX) and explore the incidents visually on these interactive global and Ukraine maps.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to improve and implement security risk management strategies to prevent or mitigate the looting of medication

To effectively keep staff and beneficiaries safe, keep services running, and improve the system to mitigate the risks posed by the looting of health care supplies in the Sahel, health care providers and aid agencies supporting health care need to design and implement appropriate **security risk management strategies** that address the looting and loss of medication and health care supplies.



Stakeholders’ roles in preventing or mitigating the looting of medical supplies

These strategies are implemented in partnerships involving local health care providers, pharmacists and those transporting medication; aid organisations supporting health care; and donors, governments and other authorities who support the provision of health care.

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 Vital medication and medical supplies are best protected by focusing on four key approaches:	Security risk management strategies The key functions of these strategies are as follows:
Prevention/protection Protecting vital medication and medical supplies from being stolen by implementing an acceptance strategy to reduce the likelihood of them being taken	<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 loot medicine and supplies</p> <p>Collecting and using data to advocate for better protection and preparedness.</p>
Preparedness Putting in place measures to train pharmacies, warehouses and health transport vehicles how better to protect supplies	<p>Educating pharmacists and other health care personnel to recognise and respond to threats and emergencies</p> <p>Strengthening the physical protection measures of sites where medicine and supplies are stored</p> <p>Developing response and emergency plans focusing on emergency contacts and efficient ways to identify what has been lost</p>
Response Ensuring that the response during an emergency is adequate	Developing response plans that identify priorities, responsibilities and procedures
Sustainability Putting measures in place to ensure that the provision of health care can continue	Developing and supporting plans for how to quickly and efficiently replace the stolen/looted medication and health supplies



AWARENESS

Community:

- Run local awareness campaigns highlighting the critical nature of the need to protect health care supplies and the devastating impacts of looting.
- Establish community early warning systems that inform health care providers of potential security threats.

Health care providers:

- Train staff on ways to identify and report signs of potential looting incidents.
- Host community forums to educate the public on the importance of safeguarding medical supplies.

NGOs supporting health care:

- Use incident data to develop targeted advocacy campaigns focusing on high-risk regions.
- Coordinate with health care providers to deliver joint awareness sessions on the ground.

Donors supporting health care:

- Fund public awareness campaigns and support educational/training initiatives about the protection of health care resources.
- Invest in systems that improve data collection and monitoring to better predict and respond to looting activities.



PREPAREDNESS

Community:

- Plan and implement community-based strategies to safeguard medical facilities and supplies.
- Support health care providers to implement security improvements and emergency protocols.

PROTECTING MEDICAL STORAGE FACILITIES AND TRANSPORT SERVICES

- Implement measures to surround the area where medication is stocked with basic security measures, including a lockable gate.
- Train medical transport personnel to avoid and respond to possible attempts to loot the supplies they are transporting.

Health care providers:

- Regularly update and practise emergency plans involving community members.
- Enhance facility security with technology and infrastructure that protects the facility from looting.

NGOs supporting health care:

- Assist in the development of emergency preparedness plans.
- Provide training and resources for health care providers to improve security measures.

Donors supporting health care:

- Fund improvements to infrastructure and provide grants for the provision of security technologies at health care facilities.
- Support the development of comprehensive preparedness strategies that include community and health care provider inputs.



RESPONSE

Community members:

- Participate in rapid response measures when looting occurs to assist health care facilities.
- Serve as liaisons to local authorities and security forces during and after incidents.

Health care providers:

- Implement emergency protocols rapidly to secure medical supplies and ensure staff and patient safety during incidents.
- Communicate effectively with local communities and law enforcement agents during crises.

NGOs supporting health care:

- Support health care facilities' efforts to quickly replace lost supplies.

Donors supporting health care:

- Ensure that funding is immediately available for response and recovery efforts after looting has occurred.
- Support health care facilities' efforts to deal with and recover from the crisis after an incident of looting has occurred.



SUSTAINING HEALTH CARE AFTER A LOOTING INCIDENT

Community:

- Collaborate with health care providers to develop sustainable protection strategies for health care supplies.
- Engage in ongoing dialogues to learn from past incidents and adapt future security measures.

Health care providers:

- Foster a culture of continuous improvement in security practices based on lessons learned from past incidents of looting.
- Maintain and strengthen relationships with local communities to ensure the sustainability of security measures to prevent looting.
- Work proactively with international partners to ensure that mechanisms are in place to quickly replace lost supplies.

NGOs supporting health care:

- Advocate for long-term community engagement projects designed to protect health care facilities.
- Offer ongoing training and support to health care providers to build resilient health care systems.

Donors supporting health care:

- Fund initiatives that focus on the long-term sustainability of health care facilities, including infrastructure and community resilience projects.
- Support ongoing education and training programmes for health care staff to deal with and recover from security incidents effectively.

ARSON ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS IN THE SAHEL

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.

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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