



Spotlight

EDUCATION

Schools in the line of fire

In the world's conflict zones, children are stripped of their right to a better future, warn aid agencies

Anan Tello London

In wartime, the destruction of a school is more than collateral damage — it represents the theft of a child's future. The past year has been especially bad in this regard, with one in three children in conflict zones or fragile states deprived of schooling.

With wars taking place in Gaza, Lebanon, Sudan, Ukraine, and elsewhere around the globe, the UN children's fund, UNICEF, described 2024 as "one of the worst years" in its history for children in conflict.

"By almost every measure, 2024 has been one of the worst years on record for children in conflict in UNICEF's history — both in terms of the number of children affected and the level of impact on their lives,"

said Catherine Russell, the agency's executive director.

"This must not be the new normal. We cannot allow a generation of children to become collateral damage to the world's unchecked wars."

In contexts like Gaza and Sudan, where many educational facilities have been damaged or destroyed by fighting and where teachers have been forced to flee, learning and play have been replaced by trauma and loss.

In Gaza, at least 658,000 school-aged children remain out of classrooms for the second consecutive academic year, with around 96 percent of school buildings damaged or destroyed since October 2023, despite their protected status under international humanitarian law.

Although Israel says it does not deliberately target civilian infrastructure, few educational institutions have been spared damage, including UN-run schools

Nearly one in six children worldwide live in conflict zones, with over 473 million enduring the highest levels of violence since the Second World War.

25m

Children in 22 conflict-affected countries who are out of school. (UNICEF).

103m

Children in 34 conflict-affected countries denied schooling in 2024. (Save the Children).

sheltering displaced civilians.

UN experts voiced concern last year over what they considered the systematic destruction of education in Gaza, not only through the crippling of schools and colleges but also the arrest and killing of teachers.

The situation is equally dire in Sudan, where a brutal civil war has wrought havoc on civilians and critical infrastructure since April 2023, killing tens of thousands and displacing more than 11.4 million, according to UN figures.

Attacks on schools, which Save the Children reports have increased fourfold since the conflict began, have forced most institutions to close, leaving more than 18 million of the country's 22 million children without a formal education for more than a year.

Adil Al-Mahi, MedGlobal's Sudan country director, believes that even if the violence ends, a full return to normal education is unlikely in the near future.

"Cities controlled by the Rapid Support Forces are badly damaged, including education facilities in those areas," Al-Mahi told Arab News.

Schools in these areas have been "used by the RSF as warehouses for military equipment," and therefore many have been targeted by the air force, Al-Mahi said. "Around 70 percent of the facilities might not be safe for children's education."

Aid agencies warned in May that Sudan is on the brink of the world's worst education crisis.

Displacement has compounded the already dire situation.

With no formal camps for internally displaced persons, many families have sought refuge on school grounds, disrupting the education of local children, said Al-Mahi.

The disruption of formal learning in conflict zones has cast a shadow over children's futures.

"Education is lifesaving," James Cox, Save the Children's global education policy and advocacy lead, told Arab News.

"School protects children from things like child labor, early marriage and pregnancy, and recruitment into armed forces."

Cox also warned that "when children are prevented from attending school for a long period, learning is significantly impacted — and can often regress."

For school-age children in conflict zones, the mental health impact can be immense. Jeeda Al-Hakim, a specialist counseling psychologist at City University of London, described being out of school as "an emotional wound that goes beyond missed lessons."

"School offers much-needed stability, a sense of normalcy, and a safe space to form friendships and express themselves," she told Arab News. "Without it, children are left isolated and burdened by feelings of fear, loss, and despair."

"To truly support these children, we must prioritize ending the conflicts that strip them of both their childhoods and their futures."