

## Education under Attack: Experts Discussion

Monday, May 17, 2010, 12:30 pm – 2:00 pm

[Center for Universal Education](#) at Brookings, 1775 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC

On May 17, the [Center for Universal Education](#) at Brookings hosted an experts discussion on the recently published UNESCO report, "[Education under Attack 2010](#)." The report finds that political and military violence targeted at education has been reported in at least 32 countries over the past three years. The discussion brought together a small group of education experts in a wide range of fields and included a discussion of the recently launched Global Coalition for Protecting Education from Attack.

The event opened with presentations from Brendan O'Malley, author of the UNESCO report, Chris Talbot of Education Above All and chair of the Global Coalition for Protecting Education from Attack, Bede Sheppard of Human Rights Watch, and Major Carroll Connelley of the Marine Corps University. Brookings Fellow and Center for Universal Education Co-Director Rebecca Winthrop served as moderator for the discussion.

Mr. O'Malley introduced the topic by detailing the types of attacks, including assassinations of teachers and administrations, sexual violence against students on their way to school, forced political programs in schools, and physical destruction of schools, that are considered attacks on education. Between January 2007 and July 2009, the worst-affected areas were Afghanistan, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, India, Iraq, Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand, Somalia and Zimbabwe.

O'Malley noted that new trends in attacks on education are emerging, including poisonings, occupation of schools by armed groups and the attacking of education aid workers. Aside from the immediate safety concerns of students, teachers and the larger community, the attacks have larger repercussions such as fuelling instability, poverty and fragility, as well as reverse economic development. He stressed the importance of developing deterrence measures internationally so that violence against schools is not overlooked. O'Malley suggested improving politicians' and commanders' recognition of education's value to inform their decisions on operations, as well as criminalizing the acts in national law using scope of [Rome Statute](#), which established the International Criminal Court.

Mr. Sheppard addressed the question of what to do next and emphasized the need to learn from UNESCO's report as well as other recent reports, such as those recently released by Human Rights Watch on the issue. For example, closer monitoring of threats against schools and teachers could help prevent attacks, or at least mitigate the damages, especially in those countries that experience attacks rising and ebbing seasonally. Sheppard said that, where possible, national governments should be on the front line of monitoring and reporting attacks against education. However, if the government is complicit in the attacks, it then becomes the responsibility of the international community to publicize and help prevent these attacks.

To begin his remarks, Major Connelley noted that the military takes very seriously violent attacks that endanger schools, students and teachers. Additionally, Connelley said that the U.S. military has a history of protecting educational institutions above the requirement set by international laws. Further, Connelley said that school attendance is used as a measurement of safety in certain conflict-affected areas, and that some military leaders use this as a gauge for assessing the level of conflict, both future and past. He concluded his remarks by recommending that international human rights law be incorporated into military education, and that engaging military members in thinking about the importance of education in community stability could be a strong force in all U.S. engagements around the world.

Mr. Talbot spoke about several initiatives that have recently been formed to address the issue of attacks on education and invited all those participating in the discussion to engage in this work. He discussed the role of a new non-governmental organization, Education Above All, which he is leading, that focuses specifically on finding creative solutions to mitigate attacks on education. This new organization is part of the Qatar Foundation and is an outgrowth of the First Lady of Qatar's, Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned, extensive advocacy on this issue. The work of the new organization will initially focus heavily on research and policy work, including supporting research to help advance the idea of a global monitoring system to track attacks on education. Very recently, a new [Global Coalition for Protecting Education from Attack](#) has been launched, bringing together multiple stakeholders from UN agencies to non-governmental groups to academic institutions.

A discussion with event participants highlighted the question of whether existing international law is sufficient to provide the legal protection needed to protect education from such attacks. Discussants noted that there is a difference between attacks on academics for free speech and those that are deliberate attacks on students, or schools, for ideological reasons such as the prevention of girls from attending schools. The distinction between the two was emphasized as it is a challenge to the definition of attacks on education. However, participants said that this is a difficult separation to make in many cases, as the root of the violence is not always discernable.

Further, it was pointed out during the discussion one example where the U.S. military in its operations in current conflicts used an abandoned school as a base for more than a year. Debate around the occupation of schools by military forces ensued and under what conditions it would be seen as permissible or be seen as preventing the resumption of schooling or make schooling the target of attacks. Participants noted that further training and understanding about the importance of schools in communities could have led the military leaders to select a different local for their base. Many participants stressed the importance of letting school buildings remain free of any military engagement.

Discussion around the new Global Coalition focused on ways to better engage actors in Washington, DC. Discussants noted that the coalition endeavors to collectively develop strategies to address the problem of education as a weapon of war, and discussants agreed that this is a timely group that more organizations should get involved in supporting.