

# Are Attacks on Education Prosecuted?

Only rarely. Despite the gravity of the crime and the significant number of attacks on schools, students, and educators globally, perpetrators are almost never held to account.

Attacks on education often involve the death or injury of students and teachers or damage to infrastructure. When schools are shelled or set on fire, classrooms shutter and the surviving students often struggle to learn or drop out, particularly girls. The loss of learning then ripples through the wider community. These attacks are carried out by state forces and non-state armed groups, typically during armed conflicts.

Attacks on schools and universities, and their students and educators, are widespread: the [Track Attacks on Education \(TRACE\) Data Portal](#) reports over 11,000 attacks on education between 2020 and 2023 around the world. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mali, Palestine, Ukraine, and Yemen are some of the countries most affected.

Yet, the trial dataset on TJET includes only a handful of prosecutions of attacks on education. One of the few examples is Colombia, where Army soldiers were tried and sentenced in a domestic court for committing sexual violence against an Indigenous girl in the vicinity of a school. Another example, at the international level, was the case brought by the International Criminal Court in *Prosecutor v Katanga* over the destruction of schools in the DRC.

During armed conflict, some attacks on education may be lawful, for example if a school is being used for military purposes. Many other attacks, however, violate international humanitarian law, since students and teachers are civilians and schools and universities are civilian objects. These attacks may also be violations of international human rights law, including the right to education and the right to life. In certain circumstances, they may even rise to be war crimes or crimes against humanity. Despite their clear prohibition, attacks on education far outnumber the prosecutions for these crimes. Where prosecutions do occur, they are often domestic: perpetrators may be tried under ordinary criminal law for offenses such as murder, assault, destruction of property, terrorism, or sexual violence, rather than under specialized provisions on war crimes or crimes against humanity.

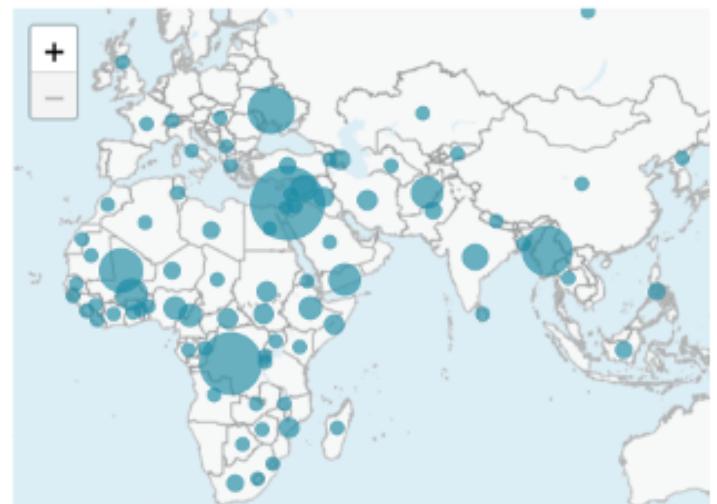
How do we explain this mismatch? A guidance brief from the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack sheds some light on the question. Attacks on education disproportionately affect children, a population that is often overlooked by justice mechanisms. Meanwhile, international crime cases often deprioritize economic, social, and cultural rights, such as the right to education. Moreover, some crimes against education may not be captured in transitional justice trial datasets like TJET, since many of these prosecutions are not framed as human rights trials. Several other explanations are also given, among them the weak judiciaries in war-affected countries.

In 2022, Al Shabab detonated two car bombs at the Ministry of Education in Mogadishu, Somalia, while secondary students and their families picked up diplomas, killing more than 120 civilians and injuring at least 300 more. Surrounding schools and universities were temporarily closed as a result. This is one example of thousands of attacks on education that occur each year. The limited number of prosecutions points to a lack of accountability for education-related crimes.

## Location of attacks

97 countries where attacks have been identified

● Number of attacks in country



## References

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