**Safe schools**

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We must take a decisive step towards making education safer. Next week governments, UN agencies and civil society organisations from around the world will convene in Abuja, Nigeria, for the Fourth International Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration.

The conference is intended to be a galvanising moment, with governments expected to make new commitments to safeguard students, teachers, lecturers, and other educational staff as well as schools and educational facilities from violent attacks.

It will be the first time the conference has been held in Africa, and in the Sahel region, one of the regions most affected by attacks on education.

Like Pakistan and many of our neighbours, as the host of the conference, Nigeria is no stranger to attacks on education. Killings, abductions and other indiscriminate attacks against school and university students and staff remain commonplace across both our regions.

Driven by incidents across Asia and Africa, reports of attacks on education and the military use of schools and universities increased in 2020 and have continued in startling numbers in 2021, even as Covid-19 forced the closure of educational facilities around the world.

Fifty schools in Gaza were damaged by Israeli airstrikes in a single week, whilst five attacks on schools in Yemen in March of this year left more than 30,000 children without access to education. In Myanmar, over 100 attacks on schools occurred in May alone, many involving explosive weapons.

Closer to home in Afghanistan, the Global Coalition to Protection Education from Attack (GCPEA) identified more than 40 attacks on schools using explosive weapons as the Taliban took over key territories. Most of the 185 students and teachers killed or wounded in these attacks were girls and women.

Such attacks not only deny children and students their right to education, they also regularly breach international humanitarian and human rights law and constitute war crimes.

The crisis engulfing Afghanistan should remind us of our country's darkest hour when in 2014, an attack by the Taliban on an army-run school in Peshawar killed 150 students and teachers.

Thankfully, we have not experienced another attack on that scale, but many more students and teachers have needlessly lost their lives since.

Between 2017 and 2019, the GCPEA identified around 50 reported incidents of attacks on schools in Pakistan, with nearly half of these attacks targeting girls’ schools. Moreover, students continue to face a multitude of other threats whilst at school include corporal punishment, rape and harassment, with severe and long-lasting adverse effects on children's mental and physical health as well as their education.

This is a challenge by no means unique to Pakistan. Yet whilst many countries are undertaking a range of measures to protect students, teachers, schools and universities from violence, Pakistan and many of our neighbours are lagging.

Since May 2015, 112 countries have endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration, an inter-governmental political commitment to protect students, teachers, schools and universities from the worst effects of armed conflict.

By endorsing the declaration, countries commit to take measures to strengthen the protection of education from attack, restrict the use of education facilities for military purposes, and ensure the continuity of safe education during armed conflict.

In those countries that have endorsed the declaration, it has played an essential role in preventing and mitigating the impact of attacks on schools and universities, and against students and staff. Despite consistently being among the top countries in terms of the number of incidents, Pakistan is not one of them.

At a recent event, I participated in my role as regional representative for Asia for the International Parliamentary Network for Education. It was inspiring to hear from Nwatamasaya Papka who is the first secretary at the Permanent Mission of Nigeria at the United Nations in Geneva. She spoke passionately of how the declaration had provided a framework for Nigeria to implement strategies and mechanisms to protect education, and critically to hold themselves accountable.

Challenges remain but they are moving in the right direction. We can’t say the same here in Pakistan. I am deeply concerned about the safety of our children whilst at school, particularly after the change of regime in Afghanistan.

Ahead of next week’s conference, Pakistan has been invited again to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration. Like for Nigeria and other countries affected by conflict and insecurity, endorsement alone is not a panacea. Yet, it shows a commitment to protect the right of every boy and girl to get an education without fear of violence or attack, and for every school and university to be a safe space for students to learn and fulfil their potential.

As the right to education in Afghanistan is under grave threat following the Taliban’s ban on girls returning to secondary school, we must make it clear to both them and the international community that Pakistan’s commitment to the right to education is unwavering. Endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration would show that intent and is a first step towards making education safer for our children.

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