Beat: News

Burkina Faso home to almost half of closed schools

in Central and West Africa

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Burkina Faso
Over a million children in Burkina Faso are currently affected by school closures with 6,134 academic institutions shut as of February 2023, an increase of over 40 per cent since the end of the last school year. Nearly one out of four schools country-wide are now out of service due to rampant insecurity and violence, which has forced close to two million people into displacement.

On the eve of the high-level conference on Education in Emergencies, organised by the European Commission and the United Nations Children's Fund in Brussels, the Norwegian Refugee Council together with the Education Cluster in Burkina Faso and the FONGIH, two umbrella entities representing 87 national and international organisations operating in the country, call for increased access to education for children left behind, whether they are internally displaced or live in enclaved areas.

"Only about a quarter of the children driven out-of-school have been given new classrooms. The majority are left without access to education, robbing them of their childhood and of their chance to become independent adults and citizens," said Hassane Hamadou, NRC's country director in Burkina Faso. "The longer this situation drags on, the graver it becomes, the harder it will be to reverse this trend and protect their futures. The authorities in Burkina Faso as well as humanitarian and development organisations must urgently renew their efforts to stop this educational hemorrhage."

Out of eight schools, only two are operational in the blockaded town of Pama in the East region, one of the three regions with the highest number of school closures along with Sahel and Boucle du Mouhoun. Six teachers and a few volunteers are currently serving over 1,000 children in Pama.

"For those of us who are still here, it's a very personal decision to stay," explained a teacher. "Education is a universal right, so we feel it's our duty to carry on. But fear doesn't go away easily. Often, we have to stop classes because we hear gunshots here or there. Threats loom large, and conditions are tough, but we can and must overcome challenges to assist children who never wished to be put in this situation."

Over 31,000 teachers have been affected by the education crisis nationwide, of which about 6,300 have been redeployed so far in schools hosting large numbers of internally displaced students. The reopening or relocation of around 300 schools since January marks a welcome step in the right direction. However, it is now crucial to increase the use of "double shifts approach" in operating schools, to set-up more classrooms wherever possible, and to accelerate the reassignment of teachers to new sites in displacement areas.

This crisis has disproportionately impacted girls. A study conducted by Plan International revealed that girls are 2.5 times more at risk of being driven out of schools than boys in a crisis situation. Meanwhile, ongoing efforts to help teachers meet the growing psycho-social needs of students often traumatized by displacement and conflict must be sustained and increased nationwide.

"Insecurity is a big part of why so many schools close, but food insecurity in the Sahel and East regions is also a driver of school dropouts," said Tin Tua's director, Yembuani Yves Ouoba. "Guaranteeing that schools and non-formal education centers provide meals and children are being fed are effective ways of keeping them in the system."

"We are witnessing an accelerating assault on education. Teachers are threatened and parents are frightened. Children are paying the heaviest price. When a child is not at school, he is more at risk of being exploited, being a victim of violence and trafficking, or even being recruited by armed groups," said the Representative of UNICEF in Burkina Faso, Sandra Lattouf. "We welcome the effective partnership and collaboration with the Ministry of National Education, Literacy, and Promotion of National Languages, which is strengthening access to education in challenging contexts. We must act now to not lose the next generation and renew efforts to

strengthen emergency and alternative education solutions."

Parties to the conflict must do more to protect school infrastructures from attacks and not occupy academic buildings. We welcome the upcoming inter-ministerial order to set up national and regional committees in charge of the implementation of the Safe School Declaration and hope they help make schools safe for all Burkinabè children.

Notes to Editor:

* At the end of February 2023, 6,134 schools were closed in Burkina Faso, a 44% increase since May 2022 (4,258). This represents 24% of all academic structures in the country (Source: Ministry of Education's statistical monthly report on Education in Emergencies from February 28, 2023).

* Number of closed schools in other West and Central African countries due to insecurity: 3,285 in Cameroon, 1,762 in Mali , 1,344 in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 878 in Niger, 181 in Nigeria, 134 in Chad and 13 in Central African Republic (Source: Unprecedented School Closures Jeopardise the Future of Millions in West and Central Africa, NRC, UNHCR, UNICEF, Education Cannot Wait, March 2023).

* The regions of Boucle du Mouhoun, East and Sahel in Burkina Faso are the most impacted by school closures and each hosts between 1000 and 1200 closed schools (Source: Ministry of Education's statistical monthly report on Education in Emergencies from February 28, 2023).

* School closures impact 1,050,172 students as well as 31,077 teachers. 262,388 of these children have so far reintegrated a formal classroom (Source: idem).

* Girls are 2,5 times more at risk of being driven out of school than boys in a crisis situation according to a 2020 study conducted in Mali and Burkina Faso (Adolescent girls in crisis, voices from the Sahel, Plan International, August 2020).
Two schools out of eight are currently operational in Pama, with 6 teachers and 6 volunteers serving over 1,000 children. (Source: NRC interviews of teachers in Pama, March 2023).

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