

Top Human Rights News of 2023

The Most-Read Stories of the Year

Paul Aufiero

Since the Hamas-led attacks in southern Israel on October 7 and the Israeli military's ensuing bombardment of the Gaza Strip, Human Rights Watch has analyzed evidence to document and report on serious abuses by Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups.

Throughout the year, we covered many topics from around the world. From a blockbuster report on Saudi border killings to Iran's feminist uprising to rollbacks and victories for LGBT rights, these were the most-read stories on our site this year.

Airbursts of artillery-fired white phosphorus fall over the Gaza city port, October 11, 2023. © 2023 Mohammed Adeb/AFP via Getty Images

1. Israel Uses White Phosphorous in Gaza and Lebanon

In October, Human Rights Watch documented Israel's use of white phosphorus in military operations in Gaza and Lebanon. The use of incendiary weapons in populated areas puts civilians at grave risk.

202310mena Israel Palestine dashcam stillsClick to expand Image

© Private

2. Videos of Hamas-Led Attacks Verified

Following the October 7 attacks by Hamas-led gunmen, Human Rights Watch verified four videos showing three incidents of deliberate killings. We have called for the attacks to be investigated as war crimes.

202308rmr_mena_saudi arabia_yemen_ethiopianmigrantsClick to expand Image

A video published on TikTok on December 4, 2022 shows a group of roughly 47 migrants,



37 of whom appear to be women, walking along a steep slope inside Saudia Arabia on the trail used to cross from the migrant camp of Al Thabit. © 2022 Private

3. Mass Killings of Migrants at the Saudi-Yemen Border

A report in August documented how Saudi border guards

Sleem.Click to expand Image Left to Right, Adam Ayyad, Wadea Abu Ramuz, Mahmoud al-Sadi, and Mohammed al-Sleem. © Private

4. Spike of Israeli Killings of Palestinian Children in the West Bank

Another August report looked at Israeli forces' killings of

and Congolese government forces gather north of Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, on November 25, 2022.Click to expand Image People displaced by fighting between the M23 armed group and Congolese government forces gather north of Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, on November 25, 2022. © 2022 AP Photo/Jerome Delay

5. Atrocities by Rwanda-Backed Rebels in the DR Congo

A February report found that the Rwanda-backed M23 armed group was responsible for summary executions and forced recruitment of civilians in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Warring parties in the DR Congo have put civilians in remote areas of North Kivu province at a heightened risk.

Muhammad al-GhamdiClick to expand Image

Muhammad al-Ghamdi © Private

6. Saudi Arabia Sentences Man to Death Over Tweets

In July, a Saudi court sen-



have killed at least hundreds of Ethiopian migrants and asylum seekers who tried to cross the Yemen-Saudi border between March 2022 and June 2023.

Left to Right, Adam Ayyad, Wadea Abu Ramuz, Mahmoud al-Sadi, and Mohammed al-

Palestinian children in the West Bank. At the time of the report's release, at least 34 children had been killed in the West Bank since the start of 2023.

People displaced by fighting between the M23 armed group



recognize same-sex spouses violates Nepal's constitution and its international human rights obligations.

The carrier section of an 9M27K-series Uragan rocket lodged in the ground near a family's home in Hlynske village, apparently fired from the west, where Ukrainian forces controlled territory while the area was under Russian occupation in 2022.

Each rocket delivers 30 9N210 or 9N235 submunitions.

tenced retired schoolteacher Muhammad al-Ghamdi to death solely over his Twitter and YouTube activity. The verdict marked a stark escalation of the Saudi government's crackdown on freedom of expression and peaceful dissent in the country.

People protest holding signs outside of the US Supreme Court at night

A crowd of people gather outside the US Supreme Court in Washington DC, May 2, 2022.

© 2022 AP Photo/Anna Johnson

7. Human Rights Crisis: Abortion in the United States After Dobbs

After the United States Supreme Court overturned the constitutionally protected right to access abortion in June 2022, people in the US who can become pregnant have faced an unprecedented rights crisis. Nearly one year later, this article documented the intensifying emergency caused by the decision.

LGBTQIA activists and supporters take part in a pride parade demanding equal legal rights and marking the month

of June as a pride month in Kathmandu, Nepal.



LGBTQIA activists and supporters take part in a pride parade demanding equal legal rights and marking the month of June as a pride month in Kathmandu, Nepal, June 11, 2022.

8. Nepal Court Orders Recognition of Same-Sex Spouse

In May, Nepal's Supreme Court instructed the government to recognize the same-sex foreign spouse of a Nepali citizen. It said that failure to

to expand Image

The carrier section of an 9M27K-series Uragan rocket lodged in the ground near a

2022, forces on both sides have used banned, indiscriminate cluster munitions which have harmed civilians and have the capability to do so for many years to come.

Members of an opposition party picket against Uganda's anti-homosexuality bill at the Uganda High Commission in Pretoria, South Africa, April 4, 2023.

10. Uganda's President Signs Repressive Anti-LGBT Law

In May, Uganda's president signed into law a regressive bill that includes potentially the death penalty for those convicted of "aggravated homosexuality." The law violates multiple fundamental rights.

An Iranian woman walks along a street-side in Tehran without wearing her headscarf.

An Iranian woman walks along a street-side in Tehran without wearing her headscarf, October 2, 2022.

11. Unveiling Resistance: The Struggle for Women's Rights

in Iran

Sweeping public protests that erupted across Iran in September 2022 have been characterized by many observers as the first feminist uprising in the region. This article looks closely at how the broader struggle of women for equal rights in Iran has evolved over the years.



family's home in Hlynske village, apparently fired from the west, where Ukrainian forces controlled territory while the area was under Russian occupation in 2022. Each rocket delivers 30 9N210 or 9N235 submunitions.

9. Ukrainian Civilian Deaths from Cluster Munitions Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February



Most of Gaza's Population Remains Displaced and in Harm's Way



On October 13, Israeli authorities ordered more than a million people in northern Gaza to evacuate their homes. Two months later, almost 1.9 million people – 85 percent of Gaza's population – are displaced, nearly half crammed inside Rafah, the enclave's southernmost governorate with a prewar population of 280,000.

People have told me it is almost impossible to walk through Rafah's crowded streets to find food, water, and medication. Israeli authorities cut off basic services and most aid supplies following the October 7 Hamas-led attack in Israel that resulted in the killing of 1,200 people, mostly civilians, according to the Israeli government.

Most Gaza residents have fled – many multiple times – pursuant to Israeli orders, in search of safety. But there's no safe place to go and no safe way to get there. According to

Gaza's Health Ministry, at least 19,600 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, have been killed since hostilities began, including in areas to which the Israeli military told them to flee.

On December 1, Israeli authorities published interactive



maps designed to guide people to safety. One man sheltering in Rafah told me of his struggles to find electricity to charge his phone, let alone connect to the sporadically functioning internet, amid regular telecommunications blackouts.

International humanitarian law prohibits the forced displacement of civilians except temporarily, when required for their security or imperative military reasons. People must be allowed to return once hostilities have ended.

The Israeli military should not

risks making parts of Gaza unliveable for years to come. At least 340 schools and the majority of Gaza's hospitals have been damaged. Satellite imagery captured since Israeli forces took control of northern Gaza in mid-November shows farmland in northern Gaza has been razed, exacerbating food insecurity and the loss of livelihoods.

A minister in Israel's security cabinet described the evacuation of northern Gaza as "rolling out Nakba 2023," a reference to the expulsion and flight in 1948 of more than 700,000 Palestinians from their homes in what became Israel.

Forced displacement is a war crime, and it's becoming more of a risk. The international community should warn the Israeli government against further actions making it difficult or impossible for displaced Palestinians to return home.

10 Good News Stories for Kids in 2023

Despite a Difficult Year, Children's Rights Made Progress



Grim stories of conflict, abuse, and deprivation seem to confront us every day. That's why at year's end we like to highlight the progress made for children. Here are 10 good news stories for kids in 2023:

For the first time, Rohingya children of all ages in refugee camps in Bangladesh were able to receive a formal education. A record 300,000 children enrolled in the Myanmar curriculum, a dramatic increase from 2021, when a pilot project reached just 10,000 children.

Three US states—Connecticut, Vermont, and Michigan—banned child marriage, while Minnesota, New Mexico, and Illinois banned life without parole sentences for child offenders.

Girls in Mexico gained greater access to abortion as Mexico's

Supreme Court ordered that Congress must eliminate federal criminal penalties for abortion.

Sierra Leone enacted a far-reaching education law that prohibits corporal punishment,



guarantees 13 years of free schooling, and protects the rights of pregnant and parenting students as well as students with disabilities.

Australia and Guyana endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration, bringing the total to 118 countries that have committed to protect schools, teachers, and students during armed conflict.

Iraq signed an action plan with the United Nations to prevent the recruitment and use of children as combatants by the Popular Mobilization Forces, a

government-allied force that has previously used children to fight against the the extremist armed group Islamic State (also known as ISIS).

European Union negotiators agreed on the text of a new law that will require companies to address human rights in their supply chains, including child labor and other child rights abuses.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child launched authoritative guidance, drawing on inputs from 16,000 children in 121 countries, detailing governments' obligations to protect children's rights in the face of climate change and other environmental crises.

Brazil, India, and the United States acted to protect the online privacy of millions of students by removing ad tracking from learning websites, ordering security audits, and fining online learning platforms for using children's data for non-educational purposes. Bulgaria, Slovakia, South Africa, and Peru destroyed their stocks of cluster munitions, which disproportionately kill and injure children. All 112 states party to the Convention on Cluster Munitions have now fulfilled their obligation to destroy their stockpiles of these deadly weapons.

A great deal more still needs to be done for children, and 2024 will bring new challenges. Governments can't rest on their laurels. They need to step up efforts to protect children and advance their rights.

Bringing Justice to Child Victims of War

ICC Prosecutor Pledges to Better Address International Crimes against Children



Zama Neff

Children forcibly deported in Ukraine. Boys and girls killed in Israel/Palestine. Girls raped in Darfur, in western Sudan. These and other children around the world are victims – in huge numbers – of grave international crimes.

Worldwide during wartime, children are killed, tortured,

wrongfully detained, sexually assaulted, abducted, and forced into national armies and armed groups. The targeting of schools and hospitals and the unlawful blocking of humanitarian aid denies them their rights to education and health. Few would disagree that brutality against a child is among the worst acts imaginable. But

when it comes to accountability, courts, international fact-finding mechanisms, truth commissions, and other judicial and nonjudicial processes frequently place abuses against children as a lower priority. Children are seen as too fragile or too unreliable to be witnesses and their cases as too time-consuming. But when the facts are not gathered and cases not brought, child victims of war are denied the justice to which they are entitled.

This week, at the annual Assembly of States Parties of the International Criminal Court (ICC), the court's prosecutor pledged, through a newly updated policy on children, to do more to hold perpetrators of crimes against children to account. He said this means considering children

in every case, while protecting individual children's best interests and respecting informed consent. While the court's convictions so far include recruitment of child soldiers and using them in hostilities, rape, and sexual slavery of children, there is far more that could be done whenever children are targeted for abuse.

The ICC prosecutor's policy on children should be a strong signal that all accountability processes should systematically incorporate the investigation and documentation of violations and crimes against children. At least

two elements are needed: 1) an explicit mandate to examine what has happened to children, and 2) the necessary skills to do so in a way that ensures the investigation and prosecution protects children. This may require reprioritizing the core competencies of investigators, prosecutors, and other staff in hiring and training. A reprioritization could also address competency in disability, gender, and cases involving people of all ages. Addressing abuses against children should be everyone's responsibility; building in specialized expertise on children in every process is also important. In truth-telling, investigations, prosecutions, and reparations, justice for crimes against children should be front and center.



“Schools are Failing Boys Too”

The Taliban’s Impact on Boys’ Education in Afghanistan

The Taliban in Afghanistan have been globally condemned for banning girls and women from secondary school and higher education, but there has been less attention to the ways in which they have also inflicted deep harm on boys’ education in the country.

Human Rights Watch inter-

women teachers of their jobs and often leaving boys with unqualified replacement male teachers or sometimes no teachers at all. Parents and students said that corporal punishment, which has long been a problem at Afghan schools, has become increasingly common. The curriculum in many

mental health services are very difficult to obtain.

The education crisis for boys as well as girls in Afghanistan needs an immediate and effective international response. In addition to calling for an end to the ban on girls and women from secondary and higher education, concerned govern-

to 12 and 5 parents of boys in the same grade range in Kabul, Balkh, Herat, Farah, Parwan, Bamiyan, Nangarhar and Daikundi provinces between June-August 2022 and March-April 2023. These provinces cover a large part of the country and are diverse in terms of ethnicity.



viewed boys and parents of boys across 8 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces and found an alarming deterioration in boys’ access to education and the quality of their education. This not only has serious implications for them and their families, but also for the country’s future, including with respect to women’s rights and overall human rights in Afghanistan. Many boys were previously taught by women teachers; the Taliban has prohibited women from teaching boys, depriving

schools appears to be under revision to remove important school subjects and promote discrimination. The human rights economic, and humanitarian crises in the country has also placed greater demands on school boys. These circumstances have led many boys to leave school altogether; those who remain attend classes with few students and sometimes no teachers. This has left boys struggling with mental health problems such as anxiety and depression in a context where

ments should press for the rehiring of women teachers, the inclusion of school subjects that are part of a quality education, and an end to corporal punishment. United Nations agencies, treaty bodies, and special procedures should focus their attention on the way boys are treated in Afghan schools as well as the banning of girls.

Methodology

Human Rights Watch conducted remote interviews with 22 schoolboys attending grades 8

Students at the secondary school level were interviewed because most of their education was during the government in power until August 2021, which allowed them to better compare the environment, changes, and challenges. All of those interviewed were students or parents of students attending public schools in cities.

The interviews were conducted using secure communications. Pseudonyms have been used in the report to protect the

identities of those interviewed, and any personal and specific information has been anonymized.

Background

Afghanistan's education system has undergone a deepening crisis since the Taliban regained control of the country in August 2021. While the Taliban's prohibition of secondary education and higher education for girls and women has grabbed headlines, the rights violations extend beyond the severe restrictions imposed on girls' and women's education. Boys attending schools across different Afghan provinces report a series of new or heightened barriers to their education, including the absence of female teachers, the increased use of corporal punishment, reduced attendance rates, the elimination of subjects like arts, sports, English language, and civic education, a decline in educational quality, increased anxiety about attending school, and a loss of hope for the future. The Taliban's prohibition of girls from attending secondary school and higher

education along with the infliction of serious harms to the system to educate boys is deeply incompatible with international human rights standards and best practices.

In contrast, boys ostensibly retain access to education, mirroring the situation during the Taliban's previous rule. But the Taliban's efforts to expand social control through remaking society at all levels is not limited to dominating the lives of women and girls. They have also made wholesale, if less visible, changes to the system of education for boys and men. These changes will also have deeply harmful, long-term effects on Afghanistan's popu-



lation and future.

In the decades before the civil war began in 1978, Afghanistan had begun to modernize its education system. From the 1970s these efforts were often imposed with force and met with violent resistance. State schools were few and largely limited to urban areas. In 45 years of war, fighting destroyed thousands of schools and madrasas (Islamic schools); many teachers and students were either killed in the fighting or fled as refugees.

During their rule from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban banned girls and women from all educational life. Boys and men could still receive an education, but

the content of that education was strictly limited. The Taliban allowed boys to attend madrasas, where their studies were mostly limited to strict interpretations of the Quran and their classes were taught by a mullah (a Muslim cleric), not professional teachers. While some other subjects, such as mathematics, were taught, others, including modern science and art, were not. The Taliban enforced a dress code for boys, requiring them to wear traditional *perahan tunban* (a loose-fitting, knee-length tunic over baggy

trousers) and grow their beards as soon as they reached puberty. Education under Taliban rule at this time violated the right to education, as well as the rights of women and to be free from ethnic and religious discrimination.

After the United States-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the creation of interim and later transitional governments, the education system underwent rapid and sweeping changes. The government of Afghanistan, which was established in 2004, undertook reforms with the help of international partners and organizations in line with its international obligations to respect the rights of children,

including under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In the continuing armed conflict between the Afghan government and multinational forces against the Taliban, both sides used schools for military purposes and the Taliban deliberately targeted schools for attack.

Afghan education experts, both women and men, designed new school curriculums, expanding subjects beyond religious subjects.

Government schools taught religion, science, mathematics, Dari and Pashto literature, English language, history, culture, art, and civic education; in some schools, sports were added for both boys and girls. The government system included both schools and madrasas; the madrasas followed most of the government curriculum, but with additional time for religious studies. However, corruption in building schools and hiring teachers, poor infrastructure, and inadequate resources, particularly in rural areas, as

well as worsening security contributed to falling enrollments after 2014. The previous absence of quality education for boys and none for girls meant that even with the education system's problems and flaws, real advances in education were made after decades of decline, offering hope to many.

The Taliban, after their return to power, engineered a swift reversal of this progress. In September 2021, after only a month back in power, they once again banned girls from secondary education. On December 20, 2022, the Taliban then banned women from attending university education. But the Taliban's

efforts to marginalize women and girls have gone far beyond blocking them from getting an education. Their evident goal is a society in which women have no role in public life and are tightly controlled by male family members is further advanced by the education boys receive in schools, including indoctrinating them into the Taliban's misogyny. **Taliban Violations of Boys' Right to Education**

While the Taliban have not prohibited boys' education, they persistently undermine the educational system in Afghanistan. By effectively prohibiting girls' access to secondary and higher education, the Taliban's harmful and discriminatory gender-based practices not only deny Afghan girls their right to education but also have adverse effects on boys. Under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which Afghanistan ratified in 2003, governments are obligated to ensure "the elimination of any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education."

Dismissal of Female Teachers
In late September 2021, the Taliban effectively banned women from most employment. Many teachers had already lost their jobs because they worked in now-shuttered girls' secondary schools, but this new ban brought another wave of dismissals of female teachers, this time those working in boys' schools.

The Taliban's ban on women's employment has not only denied thousands of female teachers their right to work but has also caused major disruption to the education of the many schoolboys who were

previously taught by female teachers. Students in many provinces of Afghanistan described to Human Rights Watch a severe lack of professional teachers due to the Taliban's ban. Students said that secondary school administrators have often responded to the loss of female teachers for technical and science subjects by appointing unqualified or less qualified male teachers, including some whose prior teaching experience was at the primary school level. Students in multiple schools in marginalized provinces of Daikundi and Bamiyan reported that Taliban-appointed school

had a total of 16 female teachers and 4 male teachers," said Wahid M., a student in grade 12 in Kabul. "Our female teachers had specializations in the subjects they taught: they were professionals. We are suffering from their absence now, and our four male teachers also fled the country after August 2021. Currently, we are taught by male teachers who would previously teach grades 4 and 5."

Nateq A. was in grade 12 at a large public school in Kabul. He said, "90 percent of teachers teaching grades 10, 11, and 12 at my school were female. After the Taliban came to

"Twelve new male teachers have been hired, most of them speak the Pashto language while most of the students don't fully or [even] partially understand Pashto. One of our new teachers even teaches mathematics in the Pashto language, and we don't understand a thing."

The teachers' limitations have obliged students to become self-taught. Muhammad K., a student in Kabul said, "The new teachers are not explaining the lessons." He said that the new teachers are so unskilled that students have no choice but to try to teach themselves, using whatever books

are available to them. Several students from different provinces told Human Rights Watch they have vacant hours during the school day when there are no lessons because of the absence of the female teachers and the lack of replacement teachers. So they end up doing nothing.

Muhammad A. was in grade 12, a critical year for university exam preparation. He studied at a large public school with 1,000 students that had been well-regarded for the quality of education it provided. Previously

the school had more female than male teachers. He said, "Out of 14 subjects, we [now] only have teachers for 7 subjects, and 7 subjects are not taught. These subjects include physics, biology, skills, computer, English, and art." He added:

"These subjects are not even removed by the Taliban; they aren't taught because our female teachers were dismissed. Therefore, I have to take private classes outside of school. But these classes are costly, and not everyone can afford them. In my family, four out of five of us are going to school, and my family can



administrators were hiring male community workers or any men with a high school diploma after removing their female teachers. In several schools in Kabul province, the situation is even worse, and there have been no replacements, leaving some students literally sitting in class with no teacher.

Our female teachers had specializations in the subjects they taught: they were professionals. We are suffering from their absence now.

Wahid M., grade 12 from Kabul

"For grades 10, 11, and 12, we

power, they were replaced with male teachers. For my class, four new teachers have been assigned. They spend more time talking about religion, the Prophet Muhammad's way of life, and the Taliban's victory of jihad against the US and the West, than teaching their assigned subjects."

"The newly hired teachers have highly aggressive behavior toward the students, so the school environment is full of fear," said Shafiq M., a student in grade 9 in Mazar-e-Sharif in Balkh province.

Some new teachers also bring language barriers into the classroom. Shafiq M. said:

hardly afford my classes. Muhammad A.'s eldest brother is the only breadwinner in the family, so taking private classes is difficult: "We seriously miss our female teachers. It's a huge loss."

In Afghanistan's central Daikundi province, Qasim R., a student in grade 10, said, "A social worker is appointed to teach us science subjects. Education is turning into a joke these days."

Students consistently reported that the quality of education has dropped significantly. They said that the newly hired teachers mainly focus on moral values, dress code, and hair styles, making a distinction between Western styles and Islamic values. They emphasize the Taliban's view of women's Islamic rights instead of focusing on school subjects.

Corporal Punishment Students and family members told Human Rights Watch that following the Taliban takeover, the use of corporal punishment at school increased. Students said that school officials used humiliation, beating, slapping, and foot whipping during morning assemblies as

forms of discipline. They also said that officials from the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice often visited their schools, sometime on a regular schedule and sometimes through surprise inspections, enforcing draconian rules and interfering with the role of the proper school authorities.

I have been beaten and badly humiliated during the morning assembly in front of everyone, once for having a mobile phone with me and the second time for my hairstyle. They cut my hair in front of everyone during the morning assembly, saying it resembled "Western

style," and after that, I was punished with foot whipping.

Under the previous government, boys were expected to wear a school uniform consisting of a blue or white shirt and dark trousers. The students interviewed for this report said that since the Taliban takeover the uniform has changed, and they are now required to wear traditional Afghan clothing. Habib A., in grade 9 in Herat province said, "In the beginning, when the government changed, some of my classmates and I had a hard time quickly changing from the pants-and-shirt uniform to perahan tunban, and because of

which has been ratified by nearly all countries around the world, including Afghanistan in 1994, lays out children's rights to education, safety, and protection from violence. The convention prohibits physical and mental violence in any form, neglect or negligent treatment, exploitation, including corporal punishment in all settings including schools, as a method of disciplining children.

Afghanistan's 2008 Education Act in article 39 explicitly prohibits any form of punishment at school. The article on the "Prohibition of Physical and Psychological Punishment,"

Hitting with sticks or rulers, kicking, slapping, and foot whipping students were used as forms of discipline.

While corporal punishment has been a long-standing problem, students in various provinces and schools consistently reported a significant rise in this practice since the Taliban came back to power. Their descriptions of abuse echo a similar rise in corporal punishment for moral crimes that the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has documented. Zaman A., a student in Herat, said:

The Taliban's strict rules are suffocating. Currently, as a student, wearing anything colorful is treated like a sin. Wearing shirts, t-shirts, ties, suits are all treated like crimes. Having a smartphone at school can have serious consequences. Listening to music or having music on one's phone can lead to severe physical punishment. Every day, there are several cases where boys get punished during morning assembly or in classrooms for some of these reasons.

According to Muhammad R.:

School is not fun like it used to be before. The constant fear of a sudden visit from the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice has made it even more stressful. Some boys escape school and smoke cigarettes and hashish, or drink alcohol. They then get caught by the Taliban soldiers and brought back to school and get beaten. Smartphones were not allowed in school under the previous government. However, the consequences now are more severe due to visits from the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. There is more focus on learn-



that, we each got two slaps and were kept out of the classroom for the entire day."

Corporal punishment of children is a violation of their human rights. The use of violence to punish children causes unnecessary pain and suffering, is degrading, and harms children's development, educational success, and mental health. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has found that all corporal punishment is prohibited under international law, and all children have the right to an education in an environment free from violence. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,

states that, "Every kind of physical and psychological punishment of students is prohibited, even for their correction and chastisement. Violators shall be prosecuted in accordance with the legal provisions."

Corporal punishment has been a longstanding problem in schools in Afghanistan. Even before the Taliban's return to power, it was not uncommon for teachers to use physical punishment. A 2008 study in Afghanistan found that violence against children was widely used and socially accepted within Afghan society, families, and schools.

ing the Pashto language at our school. One new teacher asked my classmate to write a poem in Pashto, but my classmate was unable to do it. The teacher made him stand on one foot in front of the classroom, slapped him in face several times, and pulled his ears. My classmate felt humiliated. He added, "Teachers didn't have the right to humiliate or beat students in the past. In some cases where this would happen, students had the right to complain."

Harmful Changes in the Curriculum

The Taliban are changing what is taught in both boys' schools and girls' primary schools. In early 2022, Human Rights Watch research found that teachers were already beginning to report sweeping changes to the curriculum and plans for additional changes. Students and parents told Human Rights Watch that there have been significant changes to the curriculum since the Taliban regained power. The absence of female teach-

ers—which Afghanistan ratified in 1994, focuses on the aims of children's education. The convention does not attempt to prescribe the specific content of education, but the educational process should impart values that reinforce, not undermine, the enjoyment of human rights. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in a general comment, stated that "the curriculum must be of direct relevance to the child's social, cultural, environmental and economic context and to his or her present and future needs and take full account of the child's evolving capacities."



ers—and the loss of their expertise—has contributed to some subjects not being taught, but the changes go beyond that. Subjects like sports, art, civics, and culture have often been replaced with additional hours dedicated to Quran and Islamic studies. Zahir Y. in Farah province in the southwest said, "I don't understand the difference between my school and our local mosque anymore. We are lacking professional teachers who taught us important subjects such as physics, computer science, and chemistry."

Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child,

However, the aim of education "includes not only the content of the curriculum but also the pedagogical processes, the pedagogical methods and the environment within which education takes place."

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has similarly stated that "the form and substance of education, including curricula and teaching methods, have to be acceptable (e.g. relevant, culturally appropriate and of good quality) to students."

Two key documents, produced by the Taliban, appear to be the guiding the Taliban's approach to curriculum change. The

first, produced in 2020, focuses on overall changes to the curriculum. The second document, dated April 2023, focuses specifically on Taliban plans regarding girls' education.

In December 2022, Hasht-e-Subh daily, a media outlet in Afghanistan, reported on the 2020 document, highlighting possible Taliban plans to modify school curriculums. The Taliban's Education and Higher Education Commission in December 2020 had established a committee to assess the curriculum, which recommended substantial changes. For instance, the committee proposed removing visual arts,

the authenticity of the document and whether its proposals would ultimately be accepted, the changes it suggests are similar to those reported by students and other sources. The document states that:

The current curriculum has been developed under the supervision of the Kabul puppet government's Education Directorate and its publication was funded by Jewish and non-religious countries. Therefore, it is highly likely that it adheres to un-Islamic and non-Afghan standards that resemble Western standards. However, these superstitions have been cleverly woven into

it in such a skillful way that it appears Islamic on the surface, but from a linguistic perspective, the imagery and description reveal ugly intentions that require the skill and analysis of a master [to detect].

In its evaluation, the committee provided a long list of what were said to be problems with the textbooks in use under the previous government. They said that the curriculum:

Presented ethical and moral concerns;
Did not follow Afghan culture and Muslim faith;

Overemphasized

Western "infidel" ideology;
Introduced students to and encouraged them to embrace foreign culture;

Presented democracy as a positive value;

Explained human rights using a Western definition and terms;
Promoted Western dress/clothing, i.e., ties and pants;

Mentioned the Zoroastrian religion through poems and stories;

Mentioned non-Muslim poets and scientists and praised them, including examples such as Victor Hugo and Shakespeare;

Mentioned female poets in Dari literature;

Mentioned the celebration of Norouz (Persian new year) and other non-Islamic events. A few quotes illustrate the tone of the report:

“Many books have presented women’s rights as human rights. The teachers must explain women’s rights through the framework of Islam, not what the West calls women’s rights.”

“[The curriculum is] praising historical sites/monuments and statues like the Bamiyan [Buddha] statue that is not something to take pride in; it is a disgrace and source of shame.”

“Natural disasters are only explained in terms of nature, not in terms of our faith and Allah’s will and power.”

“Women’s right to education is propagated and justified through some Hadith [sayings of the Prophet Mohammed] that suggest women have full right to education and there should not be any conditions or limitations. On this issue, the relevant teachers must clarify what kind of knowledge women can access and under what conditions they must get an education.”

“Equality: This is also one of those terms that enemies of Islam have defined based on their defiant infidel standards: Like all humans are equal, or [there is or should be] equality between men and women.”

In addition to these comments, the assessment committee included the following recommendations regarding the elimination of certain subjects: Art: Not a required subject; teaching and learning this subject is unnecessary. It can be removed from the curriculum. Instead, agriculture can be added/taught.

Civic education: From grades 7 to 12, harmful subjects exist

as a useless result of democracy. The subject is unnecessary. Culture: It is an unnecessary subject; it will be beneficial to substitute it with a useful subject.

Low Attendance: Impacts of Economic Crises and Low Quality of Education

Students and parents throughout the country told Human Rights Watch that following the Taliban takeover, there was a significant decline in boys’ school attendance. While there is no reliable data available on the numbers, Human Rights Watch’s research suggests that the worsening quality of boys’ education, combined with the



economic and humanitarian crises Afghanistan faces, has led to a significant downturn in attendance as students are discouraged from going to school and families struggle to meet basic needs, including affording school supplies, textbooks, and transportation.

They described several factors they believe contributed to declining school attendance by boys. These included the economic and humanitarian crises, displacement of teachers and students, low-quality education, Taliban restrictions, and a lack of motivation and hope for the future.

A person who has no knowl-

edge and expertise is brought to teach us physics and chemistry. This is a crucial year for us, and we cannot prepare for university entrance exams with such illiterate teachers

Sadiq T., grade 11 from Kabul

Sadiq T., a student in grade 11 in Kabul, said many of his classmates no longer came to school and that he had lost his motivation to study. “I have no interest in finishing high school,” he said. “A person who has no knowledge and expertise is brought to teach us physics and chemistry. This is a crucial year for us, and we cannot prepare for university

Nazar Y., a student in grade 8 from Bamiyan, said that his 16-year-old brother, Jafar, joined a group of 20 boys between 14 and 19 who left school and went to Iran for job opportunities. “There are no jobs here, and families are struggling,” he said. “Boys drop out of school because they have to take on [family] responsibilities.”

Abdul G., 13, in Daikundi province, said, “Since the fall of the republic government, our schools are falling, too. At my school, you can only find three or four boys present at the secondary level.” He added, “The boys are not coming

to school because they need to work. No one feels motivated. Public schools are free, but food is not, buses are not, notebooks, textbooks, and our clothing are not free.”

Sharifa A., a single mother of three boys and two girls in Bamiyan province who had worked for the previous government, said

that in 2023 she had to send her eldest son, 15-year-old Qadir, to Iran with a group of boys for work. “My heart bleeds for Qadir, but I had no choice, and Qadir knows it. One should provide food so others can continue studying.” Sharifa said that for mothers who previously provided for the family, sending their children illegally to another country would have been unthinkable—but now the situation is a “nightmare.”

“Most boys are panicking about jobs and survival,” said Abdul S., 15, in grade 10 in Bamiyan. “In my school, most boys in grades 10, 11, and 12

have either dropped out of school for work inside the country or crossed the border illegally to Iran or Pakistan for work. If it continues like this, our school will be shut down too.”

He said that: “In the past, we

the mental health of many boys, interviewees said. Some boys lost access to education as their families were forced to flee their homes for other locations in Afghanistan or abroad. Many experienced the loss of relatives, friends and teachers.

such as the costs of uniforms, school supplies, and textbooks that families cannot afford.

Reverse harmful changes to the curriculum that lower the quality of education and promote discrimination.

To concerned governments

teachers, and student attendance and graduation.

UNICEF should help raise awareness and promote equal access to quality education for all children in Afghanistan by supporting independent research on the education sector under the Taliban, including the impact of denying girls and women education; the effect of curriculum changes; the extent, drivers, and consequences of declining attendance by boys; the prevalence, characteristics, and impact of corporal punishment; the professional and economic situation of teachers and former teachers, female and male; and the long-term implications of these changes for the country.

To the UN Human Rights Council and Treaty Bodies:

Closely monitor the situation of children’s rights in Afghanistan, with a specific focus on protecting Afghan girls’ and boys’ right to education, in the upcoming UPR and CEDAW reviews.

Acknowledgments

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would usually have 38 out of 42 students present in my class. Since the fall of the government, there are typically only 12 to 15 students present. There must be multiple reasons for such low attendance, but the Ministry of Education doesn’t care.”

Taqi B., 14, from Parwan, said, “The Taliban’s Ministry of Education is solely concerned about our appearance, clothing, and phones. They don’t seem to care that more than half of the students are absent in every classroom.”

The Taliban’s Ministry of Education is solely concerned about our appearance, clothing, and phones. They don’t seem to care that more than half of the students are absent in every classroom.

Mental Health Consequences: Anxiety, Distress, and Concern for the Future

The broad-based human rights, economic and humanitarian crises in Afghanistan have had profoundly negative effects on

The enforcement of new school uniforms, the Taliban’s restrictive attitudes, instances of corporal punishment and violence, as well as regular and irregular visits from the Ministry of the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, further added to their distress.

The students with whom Human Rights Watch spoke all expressed their lack of hope for the future under Taliban rule.

Recommendations:

To the Taliban:

Immediately end the prohibition on girls and women attending secondary school and higher education.

End the ban on women’s employment, and rehire all female teachers and women dismissed from government positions.

Immediately order a ban on all forms of corporal punishment in schools.

Take steps to remove barriers to education for all students,

and donors:

Press the Taliban to end the prohibition on girls and women attending secondary school and higher education, and the ban on women’s employment.

Offer scholarships and grant visas to students from Afghanistan to pursue education abroad.

To the United Nations:

UNICEF, UNAMA, UN Women and the UN special rapporteur on the right to education should closely monitor the curriculum and education system to promote inclusive and quality education for girls and boys.

UNAMA and the UN special rapporteur on the right to education should report on boys’ rights to education, including having access to including and quality education.

UNAMA and UNICEF should collect and make public reliable data on the education system, including the number, gender and qualifications of

The aftermath of India repealing Kashmir's special status

While the Supreme Court's decision may hold legal standing, the socio-political ramifications are undeniable.

Sabir Hussain

The recent decision by India's Supreme Court to uphold the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status has ignited a fresh wave of discussions, not only about the region's autonomy but also about the role of the judiciary and the broader implications for the nation. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi hails it as a "beacon of hope", this move is a calculated political manoeuvre, raising profound questions about the court's involvement and the potential long-term consequences for the region.

At the heart of this debate is the contentious revocation of Article 370 in 2019, which stripped Jammu and Kashmir of its longstanding autonomy. The recent Indian Supreme Court ruling is an endorsement of the Indian government's political agenda. It prompts intense scrutiny of the judiciary's role in validating what is a political maneuver rather than a legal imperative.

Furthermore, the revocation of Article 370 was not a response to legal necessities but a strategic move by the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). By dismantling the region's autonomy, they assert, the government aimed to consolidate power and extend its influence in a region historically marked by political turbulence.

Moreover, this decision highlights the exacerbation of existing political polarisation in India. The bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir into two federal territories, directly governed by India's central government, has not only redefined the region's political landscape but has also ignited identity politics. The Hindu-majority Jammu and the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley now find themselves under direct rule without their own legislatures. This shift undermines the principles of pluralism and diversity that

breach of their rights. This decision reflects a failure to address the legitimate concerns of the people of Kashmir and instead reinforces a narrative of centralisation of power. The historical context of the region, marked by decades of conflict and a complex web of political, religious, and cultural dynamics, cannot be overlooked. A nuanced and empathetic understanding of Kashmir's unique challenges is essential to finding sustainable solutions, and the recent court decision falls short of acknowledging these complex-

engage in dialogue to find a peaceful resolution to the Kashmir conflict. The recent court ruling is a missed opportunity to initiate a diplomatic process that could address the concerns of all parties involved. The consequences of this decision extend beyond national borders, potentially shaping regional alliances and diplomatic relations. A more measured approach, considering the geopolitical intricacies, would have been prudent, given the potential ripple effects on an already volatile region.



have been integral to India's identity and government. These actions will risk marginalising communities and intensifying religious and cultural fault lines, potentially destabilising a region already grappling with historical tensions. The palpable disappointment expressed by political figures in Indian-Occupied Kashmir underscores a profound sense of discontent. Despite the court's ruling, there persists a resilient determination to contest what many perceive as a

breach of their rights. This decision reflects a failure to address the legitimate concerns of the people of Kashmir and instead reinforces a narrative of centralisation of power. The historical context of the region, marked by decades of conflict and a complex web of political, religious, and cultural dynamics, cannot be overlooked. A nuanced and empathetic understanding of Kashmir's unique challenges is essential to finding sustainable solutions, and the recent court decision falls short of acknowledging these complex-

ities. Similarly, the historic dispute over Kashmir between India and Pakistan adds an international dimension to this decision. Beyond impacting India's internal dynamics, the move carries broader geopolitical implications that could influence the delicate balance in South Asia. This finding, rather than promoting regional stability, might heighten tensions between India and Pakistan.

In conclusion, while the Supreme Court's decision may hold legal standing, the socio-political ramifications are undeniable. This serves as a stark reminder that legal legitimacy does not automatically translate into social acceptance, and the consequences of such decisions resonate far beyond the courtroom. There is a need for a comprehensive and inclusive approach to address the complexities of the Kashmir issue. As India navigates the aftermath of this decision, it is crucial to foster dialogue, both domestically and internationally, to build a foundation for lasting peace in one of the world's most contested regions. The complexities of Jammu and Kashmir require a nuanced understanding, and any path forward should reflect a commitment to inclusivity, dialogue, and respect for the diverse voices that make up the fabric of this historically rich region.

Is the Palestinian genocide not a Pakistani issue?

This is a narrative war. Media influencers remain unresponsive as ordinary people boycott Israeli-funding products.

Sarah Ansari

As of November 20th, 13,000 innocent Palestinians have been mercilessly killed by Israeli forces since October 7, 2023. Never have we known an example of where the oppressed can control the fuel,

demn. If they can do it, anyone can.

I would address the current government, but they can't feel the pain of their own people, let alone the Ummat, so let's not bother.

My quarrel is with the business leaders and functioning marketing departments. It is with the media, journalists and celebrities. I am not addressing

genocide in real time, the urge to post 'normal' content with a wretched Bollywood song in the background overpowers us. There is a compulsive dependency on entertainment in the masses. Any time the celebrities from here or there pass a weak, substandard, apologetic statement, we feel so validated. I do not know why. Our neighbours have completely

They have raised funds, their content is thought-provoking, and they have managed to maintain a sense of urgency in their dialogue. Rather than posting disclaimers saying, "This is my bread and butter; I have to post normal content", just change the narrative altogether. Bring a shift in your thoughts, words and, eventually, actions. 'Influence' with



food and water of the oppressor and bomb them day and night every day.

Yet, the shapers of Pakistan's narrative have failed to respond.

My quarrel is not with the citizens; they have outdone themselves with mindful boycotting and protests. Only a few weeks back, my household had me Google her grocery list to know which brands to con-

those who have released self-righteous statements that "not everything has to be on social media", are conveniently quiet or continue to honour their brand deals. This is a narrative war; how have those at the forefront decided to disassociate themselves from it? Their silence has exposed where their loyalties lie.

Despite being able to see the

checked out of the conversation though. Genocide is not trending enough for them, but God forbid we develop even a minor dislike for their brutal silence. They will still be part of our weddings, you will see. But what can we even do?

From among us, the 'commoners' and the 'ordinary', there are individuals and content creators who are leading the movement in a tangible way.

intention – you are not a salesperson. This massacre has alerted the world of a mega shift that is coming. Talk to your followers about it. If the 'normal' content you are posting makes you feel disconnected, then reevaluate your entire brand. Take it as an opportunity and rethink it.

Mohammed Anwar, a peanut vendor standing near Khalid Masjid, Cavalry Ground,

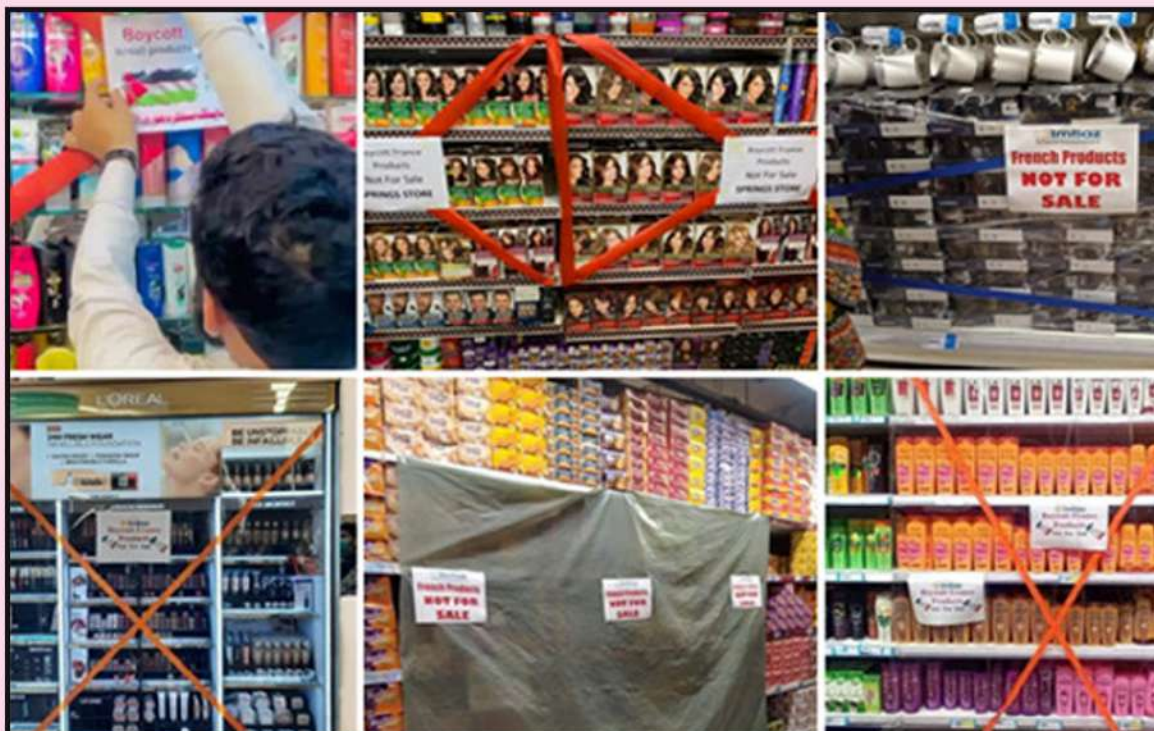
Lahore. Photo: Author
 Mohammed Anwar, a peanut vendor standing near Khalid Masjid, Cavalry Ground, Lahore. Photo: Author
 We are not taught to merge creativity with empathy. Creativity is taught as self-expression and comes from an egoistic place within. We do not know what being mission-driven is. We either know how to attack, defend or boast.

example for others to follow. There are other smaller stores in Karachi who have taken this step as well. Photo: Author
 The HR fraternity can play a big role in this narrative shift. Make reels on how tea and coffee brands have been swapped out for local ones, how lunch breaks no longer include boycotted fast food, and how gift baskets are stocked with local products – reintroduce your

spective, this is a big chance for Lal's to churn out pocket-friendly options and become a mass favourite. We are surrounded by opportunity only if we care to look for it intently. Lastly, I would like to address the shapers of the public narrative: the editorial teams, copywriters, journalists and columnists. I have yet to see one powerful headline from a local

opinions. The focus is almost always on 'virality'. Why have our agencies and art 'directors' not released anything capable of inciting human emotion? A good ad, not the obscenity we see on our billboards, can ignite movements. What we do need to talk about is that this 'conflict' deeply involves you and me. We are perpetrators and victims of this genocide and we do not realise

it. We may not own guns and bombs, but we have consumed music, movies and art that has fueled this system. For generations, celebrities and stars everywhere have endorsed products and ideas that have influenced our economic activity. Our media is equally responsible because we are under a heavy influence of what the other 'woods' are doing. We are anyway the neglected child of the world media. Our narrative is completely controlled. The whole industry is rooted in



Marketing teams everywhere are struggling to merge the message of humanity with their brands. It is more than just arranging fundraisers. What is stopping marketing teams from avoiding this narrative? Why isn't there a rush to promote "Made in Pakistan" products? Dedicate stalls in grocery stores for local sellers. How is this not an opportunity for us to advertise local alternatives with the intention of enabling people to make permanent lifestyle changes? This can be your legacy! Imtiaz Superstore has taken a brilliant stance and set an example for others to follow. There are other smaller stores in Karachi who have taken this step as well. Photo: Author
 Imtiaz Superstore has taken a brilliant stance and set an

company's culture openly. This is a massive opportunity to reposition your leadership's position. Business Incubation Centers, corporate innovation aspirants and the entrepreneurship sector can hit a sixer right now. A collective call for innovation in the food, healthcare, hygiene, and other categories awaits you. This has to be the most brutal and transparent gap analysis ever done. Your problem statements are lying in front of you – give them a direction. One thing these genocidal brands do well is that they release an 'awami' version of everything. Cannot buy the Rs1,000 chocolate? Buy the local Rs20 version instead! Why don't we learn from this? From a solely chocolate per-

team. I understand political events, weddings, childbirth, and cricket are all ground-breaking events to report, and probably that is how your bills get paid. But we didn't sit down even once in these 41 days and scroll through the feeds we proudly are "editors of". Right now, the social media feeds look heartless, tone-deaf, indifferent and cruel. The language is pathetic. Why are we calling this genocide a 'conflict'? Why are we only reporting the trending developments? I have spent close to a decade with marketing departments, editorial staff and creative teams. I know the nonchalant way in which we approach our work. The discussions lack empathy and value-based

the same ideology, but our 'personal choice' doesn't let us believe in this fact. Never did I think in my wildest imaginations that I will one day be livestreaming a genocide. But there are some forces who did think it and they are among us. The only sure shot way to emerge from the rubble of this destruction is to take back the definitions of words that have shaped our life and reconstruct the narrative that surrounds us. I will end on a cliché and the biggest truth known to the 'children of light': the pen is mightier than the sword. Little do they know that they are oppressing a nation that is not scared to write with their blood. Palestine will be free and they will free us with them.

Russia: Submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

We write in advance of the 95th session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (the “Committee”) and its review of Russia. This submission is an update to our 2022 pre-session submission[1] and focuses on the rights to education, information, and freedom of expression in the context of Russia’s war on Ukraine, as well as the forcible transfer of children. It also covers rights abuses based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has devastated schools and kindergartens throughout the country. Since February 2022, over 3,790 educational facilities have been damaged or destroyed in Ukraine, according to Ukrainian government figures,[2] severely interrupting access to education for millions of children. Human Rights Watch has documented the damage and destruction of schools and kindergartens in four Ukrainian regions that occurred during the first months of the fighting.[3] Human Rights Watch visited 50 education facilities in the Kyivska, Kharkivska, Chernihivska, and Mykolaivska regions and interviewed almost 90 school officials, representatives of local authorities, and witnesses to military operations. We found most of the damage to educational facilities resulted from aerial attacks, artillery shelling, rocket strikes, and, in some cases, attacks using cluster munitions—causing significant damage to roofs, the collapse of walls, and major debris in classrooms. Russian forces also frequently used

schools and kindergartens to encamp their soldiers and parked military vehicles and other equipment in schoolyards. In some cases, they used schools as medical facilities or to detain civilians. Russian forces occupying schools almost invariably looted and pillaged them of desktop and laptop computers, televisions, electronic blackboards, other school equipment, and heating systems. Pillaging is a war

attend a shortened school day or study in shifts, as a smaller number of functioning schools attempt to accommodate an increased number of students. Many other children participate in distance learning either because they are enrolled in schools that were damaged, reside in areas of active hostilities, or cannot travel to other schools due to distance or lack of access to transportation. Some but not all distance

tion of students, teachers, and schools during times of armed conflict.[5] Russia has not done so.

Human Rights Watch recommends that the committee ask the Russian government:

Has Russia carried out any investigations into unlawful attacks by its armed forces and affiliated forces on schools, or attacks that have caused disproportionate damage to schools, during the reporting



crime.

Withdrawing Russian forces left behind burned-out and ransacked classrooms, and the school equipment that was not looted was often broken. Russian soldiers vandalized schools by painting graffiti on walls, typically with expressions of hate towards Ukraine and Ukrainians.

Children whose schools were severely damaged or destroyed in attacks often relocated to other schools. In other cases, children are compelled to

learning entails online classes, which are subject to electricity and internet outages due to the hostilities. Teachers said many families with more than one child lacked an adequate number of computers or devices, which also hindered distance learning.

As of October 2023, 118 states had endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration,[4] an inter-governmental political commitment that provides countries the opportunity to express political support for the protec-

period?

Do any Russian laws, policies, or trainings provide for explicit protection for schools and universities from military use during armed conflict?

Human Rights Watch recommends that the Committee call on the Russian government to: Immediately cease all unlawful attacks, including deliberate, indiscriminate, and disproportionate attacks on civilians and civilian objects.

Cease the use of unguided rockets, cluster munitions, and

other explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas.

Recognize that schools not being used for military purposes are civilian objects that may not be targets of attack.

Take appropriate disciplinary and legal action against military personnel, regardless of rank, responsible for unlawful attacks, including as a matter of command responsibility.

Take concrete measures to deter the military use of schools by armed forces and Russia-controlled armed groups, as encouraged in UN Security Council Resolution 2225 (2015).

Take all feasible precautions to avoid the loss of civilian lives and damage to civilian objects, including schools, in the conduct of military operations.

Take all feasible precautions to protect civilians and civilian objects, including schools, under their forces' control from the effects of attacks.

Endorse the Safe Schools Declaration.

Disinformation in Russia and Russian-occupied territories

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian authorities and their proxies, in violation of international law on an occupying state's obligations, worked to replace the Ukrainian education system in occupied Ukrainian territories with the Russian education system, teaching the Russian curriculum, in the Russian language. It is estimated that one million school-aged Ukrainian children lived in Russian-occupied territories by spring 2023.[6] Occupying authorities in these areas retaliated against Ukrainian teachers who refused to work under the Russian system. They pressured parents who did not want their children to study in the Russian language and under the Russian curriculum and threatened parents whose children study online in the Ukrainian school system with fines, detention, and deprivation of child custody.[7]

The Russian curriculum justi-

fies the invasion, falsely portrays Ukraine as a "neo-Nazi state," and strictly limits instruction in the Ukrainian language, violating Ukrainian children's right to an education that develops respect for the child's "own cultural identity, language and values," as well as the "national values" of the child's country and country of origin.[8]

Distortions in the Russian curriculum also violate Russian children's right to education and information, denying them access to unbiased information and materials from a diversity of national and international sources.

In 2023, the Russian education ministry launched a new history textbook[9] for grade 11 students. Human Rights Watch examined the textbook closely and found that it contains blatant falsehoods, distortions, and anti-Ukrainian propaganda. [10] Its final chapter addresses the invasion of Ukraine, calling it a "Special Military Operation," and includes sections with titles such as "Ukrainian neo-Nazism," "The return of Crimea [to Russia]," and "Ukraine, a neo-Nazi state." [11] It argues that in 2014, "Ukrainian nationalists with direct support of the West" staged "a bloody military coup" to overthrow the government and then launched a violent crackdown on the citizens opposed to the new regime and Russian speakers in general, which led to the war in the east of the country and the emergence of so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR), whose "independence" Russia recognized in 2020 before incorporating them in 2022. The authors of the textbook falsely claim that Russian forces do their utmost to protect civilians and do not under any circumstances attack "residential areas" while Ukrainian forces routinely use "their own citizens... as a human shield."

Occupation authorities use

this textbook in classes in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine, which in 2022 also received other textbooks taught in Russia. They also confiscated and destroyed Ukrainian school materials. For example, Human Rights Watch obtained copies of two documents, which state that in Balakliya district of Ukraine's Kharkiv region, while under Russian occupation in 2022, a special commission of school employees working with the occupying authorities had inventoried and seized Ukrainian textbooks and other materials from several local schools.

Ukrainian children under occupation and Ukrainian children who were deported and now study in Russia also received military training in schools. They receive indoctrination with extensive propaganda, as do Russian children, including during military training classes and the so-called "lessons about things that matter," which were introduced by the Russian education ministry following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with the aim of boosting students' "patriotism." [12]

According to media reports, school children across Russia, including deported Ukrainian children, have been engaged in making camouflage nets for military vehicles and equipment as well as candles and clothes for soldiers fighting in Ukraine during shop class or as part of quasi-voluntary extra-curricular activities.[13] In occupied territories, for instance in Mariupol, Vladimir Putin's portraits, his "patriotic" quotes, and portraits of Russian "heroes of the Special Military Operation" have been exhibited in schools, where Ukrainian children are required to sing Russia's national anthem.[14]

De facto authorities in Ukraine's occupied territories have subjected some children who spoke Ukrainian in schools to ill-treatment. For example, a teacher from

Melitopol who remains in contact with the family of a former student, under 18, told Human Rights Watch, "They put a bag on [his] head for speaking Ukrainian and dumped him thirty kilometers outside the city." [15]

Human Rights Watch recommends that the committee ask the Russian government:

How many Ukrainian children are currently enrolled in schools in Russia's internationally recognized territory?

How many children are enrolled in schools in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine (namely, Crimea and parts of Donetsk, Luhanska, Zaporizka and Khersonska regions)?

What steps is the government taking or planning to take to ensure Ukrainian children in Russia and in Russian-occupied territories receive an education that develops respect for the child's "own cultural identity, language and values," as well as the "national values" of the child's country and country of origin?

What steps is the government taking or planning to take to ensure that all children in Russian schools receive access to unbiased information and materials from a diversity of national and international sources?

Human Rights Watch recommends that the committee call on the Russian government:

Immediately stop all attempts to Russify the education system and to carry out political indoctrination in occupied territories of Ukraine or with regards to Ukrainian children in Russia.

Ensure that, as part of the school curriculum, all children in Russian schools receive access to unbiased information and materials from a diversity of national and international sources.

Facilitate the education of children in occupied territories of Ukraine, fully in line with Ukrainian curricula and Ukrainian law, and ensure that the education process is free of

any religious or political propaganda designed to wean children from their natural milieu. Ensure that education staff in occupied territories of Ukraine can exercise their duties and students can follow Ukrainian curriculum without harassment and interference by occupying authorities.

Investigate all incidents of harassment, intimidation, and ill-treatment of Ukrainian education workers, students, and parents of students, and hold perpetrators to account.

Forcible Transfer of Children (articles 8, 9, 10, 11, 17, 23, 27, 29, and 38)

In March 2023, Human Rights Watch documented the forcible transfer and deportation of children and the war's devastating impact on children in Ukrainian residential institutions.[16] By that time and based on Ukrainian government data, 100 institutions that had housed more than 32,000 children before 2022 were in regions under partial or total Russian occupation and which Russia stated, falsely, that it had annexed in September 2022.[17] Other reports, based on open-source information, have identified 6,000 Ukrainian children deported to Russian camps and other facilities, and more than 2,440 Ukrainian children deported to Belarus.[18]

Many children in residential institutions had to shelter for weeks from bombardments in basements without electricity or running water, including children with disabilities.[19] A group of children from an institution in Mariupol did not speak for four days after they were evacuated to Lviv, in March 2022, apparently due to trauma, one volunteer said. Staff at another institution coached older children to carry younger children to the basement when air-raid sirens sounded.

Statements by Russian authorities, Ukrainian activists and lawyers, and news reports indicate that at least several thousand children from residential

institutions have been forcibly transferred to other occupied territories or deported to Russia.[20]

Russia's parliament changed laws in May 2022 to enable authorities to facilitate giving Russian nationality to Ukrainian children,[21] enabling their guardianship and adoption by Russian families in Russia.[22] Russian officials have said that hundreds of Ukrainian children have been adopted.[23] International standards prohibit inter-country adoption during armed conflicts.

On March 17, 2023, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for President Putin and Russia's children's rights commissioner, Maria Lvova-Belova, for the war crimes of unlawful transfer and deportation of children.[24]

In May 2023, more details came to light through the findings of an investigation by an expert appointed under the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE). Although the report acknowledges uncertainty regarding exact numbers, it concluded that forcibly deported Ukrainian children had been subjected to "numerous and overlapping violations"[25] of their rights: they were placed in an unfamiliar environment far removed from Ukrainian language, culture, customs, and religion, and many were exposed to military training and "to pro-Russian information campaigns often amounting to targeted reeducation." [26]

Human Rights Watch recommends that the Committee ask the Russian government: Since February 24, 2022, how many Ukrainian children have Russian and occupation authorities brought to Russia, and how many to Belarus, without the full legal consent from their parents or guardians? Of these, how many have received Russian citizenship? How many have been adopted in Russia since

then?

Human Rights Watch recommends that the Committee call on the Russian government to: Publish the number and whereabouts of all children and staff transferred from Ukrainian institutions to Russia or Russian-occupied territories or to Belarus, and facilitate their contact with their families, Ukrainian child protection agencies, and international humanitarian agencies, as well as their return to Ukraine.

Repeal any legislation that limits the ability of Ukrainian families, guardians, or authorities to obtain the return of transferred Ukrainian children, including the legislation that allows for granting Russian citizenship to and adoption of Ukrainian children.

Ratify the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption.

Violations of Children's Right to Freedom of Expression (articles 13, 16, and 37)

Authorities have retaliated against Russian children expressing their opinion for criticizing Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In November 2023, a school principal reported two students to the police for publishing a video in which they discussed Russia's war in Ukraine. The police charged them with an administrative offense of "discrediting" the military,[27] while the school amended its rules to prohibit discrediting the military, public officials, and teachers.[28]

In October 2022, a police officer came to a school in Moscow and interrogated a 10-year-old girl about her pro-Ukraine social media avatar and a poll she ran in a school chat asking students what they thought about Russia's war in Ukraine.[29] After her mother arrived, the police escorted them to a police station for another interrogation, followed by a "house inspection" where the police accessed their mobile phone and laptop look-

ing for messages and social media publications "discrediting" the military. A juvenile affairs commission found the mother guilty of failing to fulfill parental duties, an administrative offence, and of "projecting her political opinions onto her daughter and failing to censor her social media activities." They handed down a warning to the mother and put the family on record for further control.[30] A Moscow court rejected the mother's claim against what she argued was an illegal house search. The family left Russia for fear of further retaliation.

In April 2022, a 13-year-old girl drew an anti-war painting in an arts class. The principal of the school, in Tula, called the police, who escorted her and her father to a police station.[31] The police then charged him with an administrative offense of "discrediting" the military in his social media comments. The next day, the Federal Security Service (FSB) detained the girl in school and interrogated her. In December, law enforcement searched their home.[32] In March, they arrested the father and charged him with a criminal offence of repeatedly "discrediting" the military. A court put him under house arrest, while his daughter was placed, incommunicado, in a foster home for over a month, until her estranged mother stepped in and took her.[33]

Human Rights Watch recommends that the committee ask the Russian government:

How many children were detained and how many children were sanctioned for expressing their opinion during the period 2017-2022?

How many parents were sanctioned over their children expressing critical opinions of the Russian government or authorities, including criticism of Russia's invasion of or actions in Ukraine?

What steps has the government taken to ensure children's enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression?

Human Rights Watch recommends that the committee call on the Russian government to: Ensure that children can express their opinion freely without risk of retaliation.

Investigate all instances where children and/or their parents were sanctioned over criticizing the authorities.

Children's Rights Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (articles 2, 13, 16, 24, and 28)

In July 2023, the Russian parliament adopted a new law allowing surgeries on intersex children to be carried out without their consent and banning transgender people from accessing gender affirming health services, including elective surgeries.[34]

The law infringes on the rights of both intersex children and transgender people. In particular, children born with variations in their sex characteristics—also known as intersex children—would continue to be subjected to medically unnecessary, nonconsensual surgeries to “normalize” their healthy bodies. This practice is not only discriminatory but also violates the rights to health, physical integrity, and privacy.[35]

In December 2022, the Duma extended the scope[36] of Russia's harmful “gay propaganda” law of 2013, which forbids the public portrayal of “non-traditional sexual relations.”[37] Previously focused on children, the prohibited exposure under the new version now applies to any age group. In addition, some regions have their own regional “gay propaganda” laws.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth in Russia have long faced threats, bullying, abuse including within their own families, as well as discrimination. Human Rights Watch has found that the “gay propaganda” legislation increased social hostility and led to an uptick in violence. The law has also had a stifling effect on access to sexuality education and support

services.[38]

The “gay propaganda” legislation has been used to shut down websites that provide valuable information and services to teens across Russia and to bar LGBT support groups from working with youth. Its passage coincided with increased, often-gruesome vigilante, homophobic violence against LGBT people in Russia—frequently carried out in the name of protecting children and “traditional values.” Individual mental health professionals have curtailed what they say and what support they give to students. This discriminatory legislation has also been extensively used by the government to stifle LGBT events and harass children for participating in cultural events.[39] It has also been used to curtail art seen to be teaching tolerance and LGBT-themed posts on social media.[40]

By enshrining discrimination in national law, Russia's “gay propaganda” laws violates Russia's international human rights obligations.

International bodies—including this committee as well as the European Court of Human Rights and the UN Human Rights Committee—have rightly expressed increasing concerns about these laws and called for their repeal.[41]

Human Rights Watch recommends that the Committee ask the Russian government:

What steps is Russia taking to provide access to age-appropriate, comprehensive, and inclusive health-related education and information?

What steps is Russia taking to gather data about homophobic and transphobic crimes, make such data publicly available, and hold accountable those responsible for such crimes?

Human Rights Watch recommends that the Committee call on the Russian government to: Repeal discriminatory laws against LGBT people, including the “gay propaganda” law (Federal Law No. 135-FZ), and instruct regional legisla-

tures where regional “gay propaganda” laws remain in force to repeal these laws.

Introduce legislation to protect the rights of all LGBT people, including children, such as legislation to explicitly proscribe discrimination against them in public services and to make sexual orientation and gender identity protected categories against discrimination in relevant provisions of Russia's criminal and civil laws.

Include information about sexual orientation and gender identity in the national curriculum based on guidelines set forth by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and issue a non-discrimination policy inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity for all mental health providers.

Monitor the response of law enforcement officials to crimes against LGBT people including children, with the goal of continuously improving it.

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