

NAIROBI, 10 March 2011 (IRIN) - Several Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq and Yemen are unlikely to achieve the education-for-all Millennium Development Goals by 2015 because of insecurity and conflict, according to a new report by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The education-for-all goals were endorsed by more than 160 countries in 2000. But according to Kevin Watkins, director of UNESCO's 2011 Global Monitoring Report, children and education are not just getting caught in the cross-fire, they are increasingly the targets of violent conflict.

"The failure of governments to protect human rights is causing children deep harm - and taking away their only chance of an education," he said.

The UNESCO report, entitled *The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education*, says 35 countries were affected by armed conflict between 1999 and 2008, several in the Middle East. "Children and schools are on the front line of these conflicts, with classrooms, teachers and pupils seen as legitimate targets," it noted.

Egypt

Recent demonstrations and clashes in Egypt led to the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak, but also closed many schools. In mid-February, half-term was extended for two weeks. Schools in only seven of the country's 29 governorates reopened after the recess, according to sources in Cairo.

The Interior Ministry deployed police outside schools to beef up security and encourage a return to school, but thousands of parents still preferred to keep their children at home.

"A deteriorating security situation hinders the opening of the schools and this affects the whole educational process," Fathi al-Sharqawi, a professor of educational psychology at Cairo's Ain Shams University, told IRIN. "Teachers will have to skip some parts of the curricula after the students go back to their classrooms, which will also affect these students' learning badly."

Hundreds of parents have complained that their children are attacked by thugs on their way to school, according to human rights groups. The Egyptian Centre for Human Rights, for example, said some parents complain that criminals use weapons to grab money from children.

Manal Abdul Aziz, an Egyptian journalist who opted for home-based tuition for her two children, told IRIN in Cairo: "There is total obscurity about the future of this academic year." The cost of hiring five teachers for her two children (aged 12 and 15) is the equivalent of US\$169 a month - a significant sum for most families.

Iraq

Decades of war in Iraq, UN sanctions, poor security and the economic situation have adversely

affected education and increased illiteracy levels. According to data produced by the government and UNESCO in September, at least five million of Iraq's almost 30 million people are illiterate. Of these, 14 percent are school-age children who left school to feed their families, are displaced or have no access to suitable schooling.

Ahmed Khalid Jaafar, 14, told IRIN in Baghdad that he left school after his father died in an explosion three years ago, and sought work on the streets to feed his mother and two younger daughters.

"I sell gum and my mother works is a seamstress," said Jaafar. "We make 200,000-300,000 dinars (US\$160-250) a month. We spend that money on the most important things, mainly food. School is not important now." Jaafar and his family squat in an abandoned government building.

The September data show that adult illiteracy in Iraq is now one of the highest in the Arab region. In rural areas, almost 30 percent of the population are unable to read or write. Significant gender disparities exist, with 40 percent of the illiterate being women.

Other countries

Bahrain is on track to achieve the goal of halving illiteracy levels by 2015, but countries like Iraq, Mauritania and Sudan are off track. "The recent experiences of Algeria, Egypt, Kuwait and Yemen show that literacy policy can be effective: all four countries have increased their adult literacy rates by at least 20 percentage points in the past 15-20 years," the UNESCO report said.

In Yemen, a reallocation of 10 percent of the military budget to education would put an additional 840,000 children in school. In the north, 220 schools were destroyed, damaged or looted during fighting in 2009 and 2010 between government and rebel forces, according to the report. "In Yemen, many internally displaced children complement family income by begging, smuggling or collecting refuse, and there are concerns that child labour is increasing."

In Syria, attendance rates in pre-school programmes varied from less than 4 percent for children in the poorest households, to just above 18 percent for wealthy households.

In harm's way

According to the report, armed conflict places children directly in harm's way. Some get killed while others are exploited as soldiers or forced to flee their homes and become refugees.

"Children subject to the trauma, insecurity and displacement that come with armed conflict are unlikely to achieve their potential for learning," it said. All too often, armed groups see the destruction of schools and the targeting of schoolchildren and teachers as a legitimate military strategy.

In conflict situations, children fear to go to school, teachers to give classes and parents to send their children to school. According to UNESCO, in such situations, children suffer psychological

trauma, as well as loss of parents, siblings and friends. One survey of Iraqi refugee children in Jordan found that 39 percent reported having lost someone close to them, and 43 percent witnessed violence.

“Armed conflict remains a major roadblock to human development in many parts of the world, yet its impact on education is widely neglected,” said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova. “This groundbreaking report documents the scale of this hidden crisis, identifies its root causes and offers solid proposals for change.”

Source: [IRIN](#)