

Sinai Foundation for Human Rights (SFHR)

Egypt:

Follow-up evidence to the Committee on the Rights of the Child

Introduction

SFHR is an independent, nongovernmental, nonpartisan organisation which focuses on monitoring, documenting and reporting on human rights abuses in Egypt, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula and other marginalised areas.

This submission offers additional evidence to the Committee following our input at the pre-session.

Summary of evidence submitted at pre-session

The Foundation's [detailed research report](#) submitted to the Committee at pre-session exposed widespread abuses of children's rights by the Egyptian military and allied non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in North Sinai since 2013. Using documentary sources, satellite imagery, official sources, and first-hand accounts, we showed that, at the time of writing:

- **At least 60 state-run schools had been demolished or attacked by the Egyptian military.** Most were elementary schools. For several demolished schools, satellite images taken before and after the attack conclusively verified local testimony claiming that the Egyptian military had destroyed the institutions, often overnight. Satellite imagery of one school showed evidence of attack from the air. Little progress had since been made to rebuild demolished schools.
- **At least 39 schools had been commandeered as bases by the Egyptian military.** Satellite images showed the establishment of military fortifications around these sites and the erection of military equipment on the premises. Such equipment included large communications antennae, military vehicles, and miscellaneous military equipment on the top of school buildings.
- **Children were being used to participate directly in hostilities.** We included several examples of social media footage showing the use of adolescent children by NSAGs allied to the Egyptian military and intelligence services. We gave evidence also of the combat deaths of some of these recruited children.
- **The Egyptian military had repeatedly announced that children could enlist from age 15, in violation of OPAC.**

Further evidence

Extending our initial research, the Foundation has conducted interviews with dozens of local residents, teachers, and government employees working in local educational departments. These testify to multiple violations of children's rights by all military actors, including the state armed forces, in North Sinai between 2013 and 2023. We have visited most villages around Rafah, Sheikh Zuweid, Al-Arish, Bir al-Abd and Al-Hassana, identifying 135 schools and educational institutions affected. Our team also collected extensive photographic evidence of violations, including from satellites.

These findings are presented in detail in the Foundation's major research report, [Mines of the Future: Violations of the right to education in North Sinai in the war decade \(2013-2023\)](#), released in April 2024.¹ The report extends the evidence presented to the Committee at pre-session. It shows clearly that the State party's responses to these issues, as raised with them in the Committee's list of issues, are incomplete, frequently incorrect, and seriously misleading.

1. Military use of schools

List of issues and replies

At point 11(c) of the List of Issues, the Committee asked the State party for information on the measures taken to prevent the military use of schools in North Sinai and to guarantee children's right to education and health, and to protection against violence.

In its Replies at paragraph 68, the State party insists that state security forces in North Sinai were issued with instructions to secure the perimeters of public buildings such as schools and hospitals, but not to use them for military purposes.

The reply does not address the committee's question. As described above, the evidence we provided at pre-session clearly reveals the systematic military use of schools throughout North Sinai, including the installation of military equipment on school premises and the presence of Egyptian military personnel and NSAGs, including the ISIS affiliate Sinai Province and state-allied militia.

Follow-up evidence

The State party's claim that their military may have secured school perimeters for the safety of children is wholly inconsistent with the substantial military fortifications installed both around and within the perimeters of schools. Extending the evidence provided at pre-session, *Mines of the future* carefully documents the unambiguous military use of 49 schools since 2013. 10 of these are still used as such today.

Despite the government's communications with the committee denying the use of schools for a wide range of military purposes, ministers and staff have occasionally admitted otherwise. For example, on 13 November 2021, the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Education in North Sinai

¹ SFHR, [Mines of the future](#), 2024.

wrote to a parliamentarian, who posted a copy on Facebook.² The letter revealed that **Al-Sekka Al-Hadid Primary School for Boys** had been used militarily by 14 troops of the Egyptian police. Our research proved that the school was closed and militarised for six years from 2016 until the troops' departure in December 2022.

Similarly, a [news report](#) from *El-Watan*, a newspaper close to the government, cited a security source as saying, 'The army managed to establish a large security ambush inside the abandoned **Al-Okour School** south of Sheikh Zuweid to prevent terrorist elements from using it as a shelter again.' In fact, the school had not been 'abandoned'. Eyewitnesses confirmed that the school had been operating regularly until the military prevented students and teachers from entering it and placed a military outpost on its roof.³

On an [interactive map](#), we have plotted all schools known to have been used for military purposes in North Sinai.

A typical story is that of the **Al-Shaheed Hazem Ibrahim Joint Elementary School**, near Bir Al-Abd, which was militarised between July 2019 and March 2023, even as the school continued to operate.⁴ Video and satellite imagery obtained by the Foundation shows a military post on the school's roof, four tall watchtowers at the corners of the school, and military vehicles in the yard.

According to eyewitnesses, the army began modifying the single-storey school in July 2019 with the building of the four watchtowers topped by defensive sandbags. They then raised the level of the outer wall, used several classrooms as quarters for soldiers and weapons storage, and kept military vehicles in the schoolyard. Soldiers would open fire when they felt threatened or for security purposes while teachers and students were inside the school.⁵ The school's deputy head teacher confirmed this, adding that the armed forces had approved the presence of students and teachers in the school while it was used as a military base.⁶

Open-source satellite images reveal the school's radical transformation for military use. Buildings north and east of the school were destroyed, and several vehicles can be seen both inside and outside the school in August 2020 and October 2021. Satellite images appear to indicate surveillance towers on the roof.

² [Letter from the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Education in North Sinai to Parliamentarian Ibrahim Abu Shaira](#), 13 November 2021, published on Facebook on 30 December 2022.

³ Muhammad Muqallad, '[Establishment of 3 new security ambushes south of Sheikh Zuweid](#)', *El-Watan*, 8 November 2016.

⁴ SFHR, [Mines of the future](#), 2024, pp. 115-118.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ A [Facebook post](#) of 8 September 2019, written by the school's deputy head teacher, explains that the armed forces had agreed to the presence of students and teachers at the school while the army also occupied the site. Publication date September 8, 2019, last accessed September 15, 2023.



Image 1: Blue circles and ovals indicate possible vehicles and activities, while red indicates structures erected above the school. The purple squares represent the cleared cultivated areas, and the green arrows represent the modifications outside the school.

The Foundation has obtained a video from the ground showing these developments, of which the following image is a screenshot.

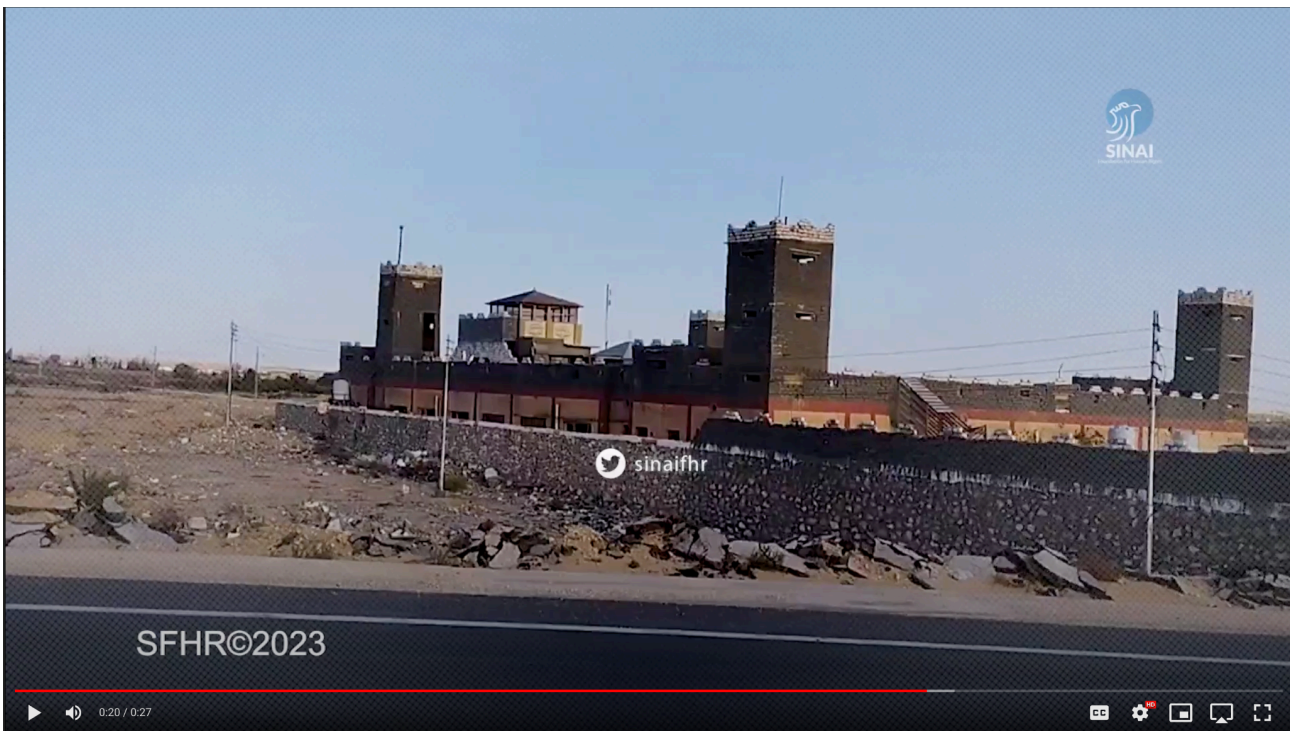


Image 2: Video captured in March 2023 showing the school premises after the military modifications.

The new watchtowers erected above the school correspond to satellite images.

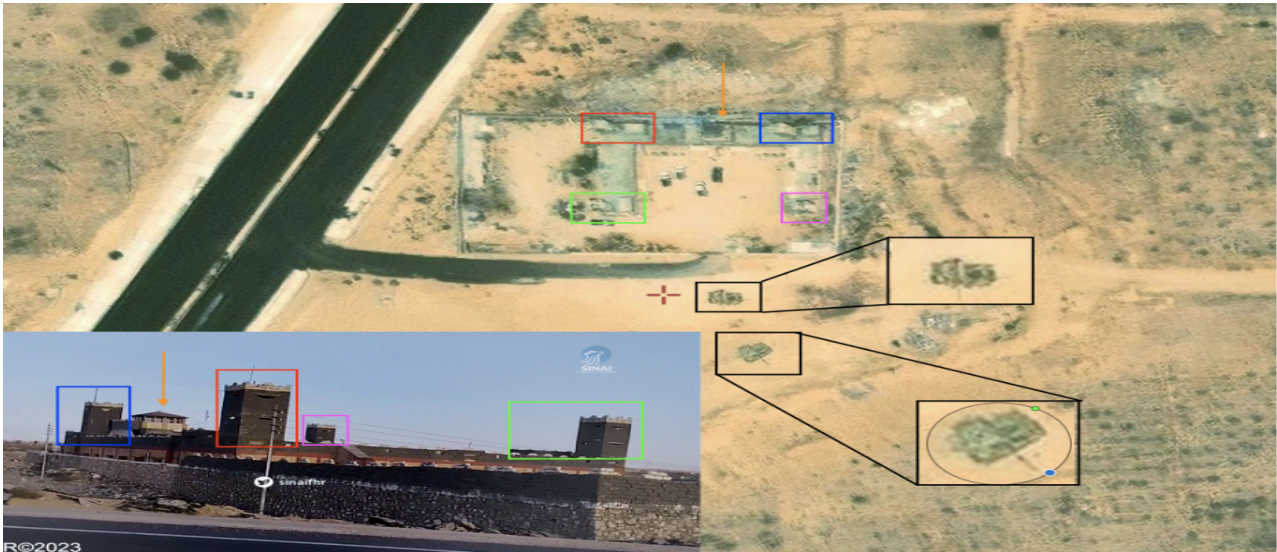
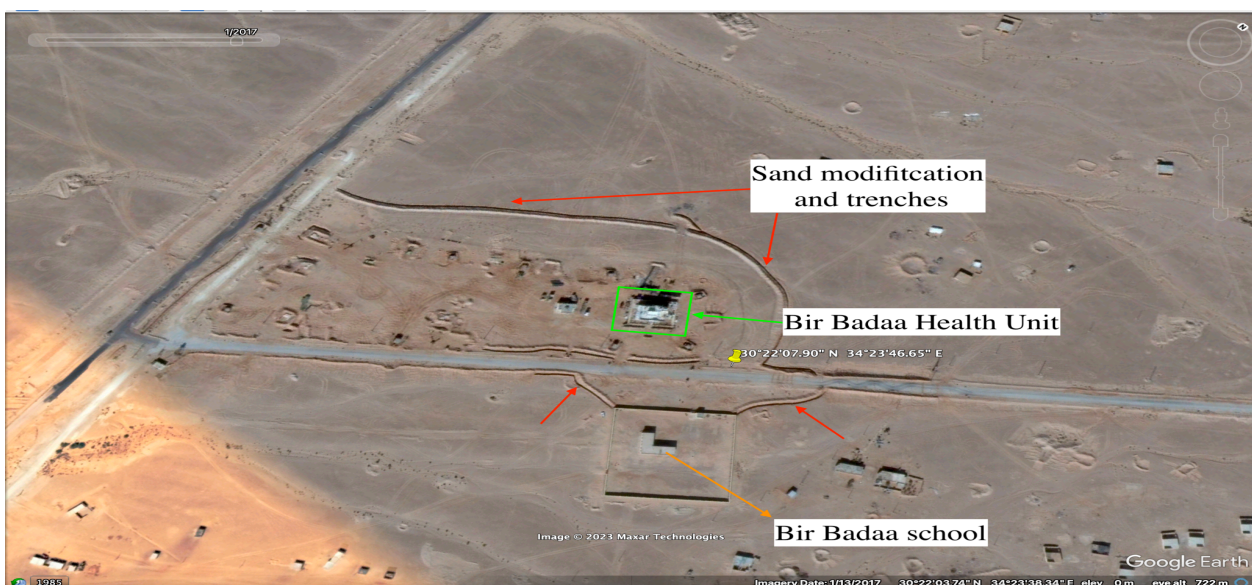


Image 3: Satellite images dated August 22, 2022 show the presence of two military vehicles, one of which is likely a tank. They also show the high towers that were built above the school wall. Source: Maxar.

Another typical story is that of the **Bir Badaa Health Center and Bir Badaa Joint Elementary School**, near Al-Hassana. According to eyewitnesses and satellite imagery, the school and the health centre have been used by the army for over seven years from July 2016, when students were evacuated, to the present day. Egyptian military activity became evident as a new checkpoint was established on the main road, which can be seen in satellite imagery. Both the Bir Badaa health unit and school were repurposed as military checkpoints, a transformation which has been corroborated by social media posts, locals testimonies and satellite images confirming an increased army presence in the area.⁷

As the images below show, the health centre was fortified for military use with sand ramparts, roadblocks, a communications tower, and military vehicles, and surrounding buildings were demolished. This is the sole military checkpoint within a 30-kilometre radius. The latest available photos in May 2021 show Egyptian armour, including a tank, around the school.



⁷ SFHR, [Mines of the future](#), 2024, pp. 128-129.

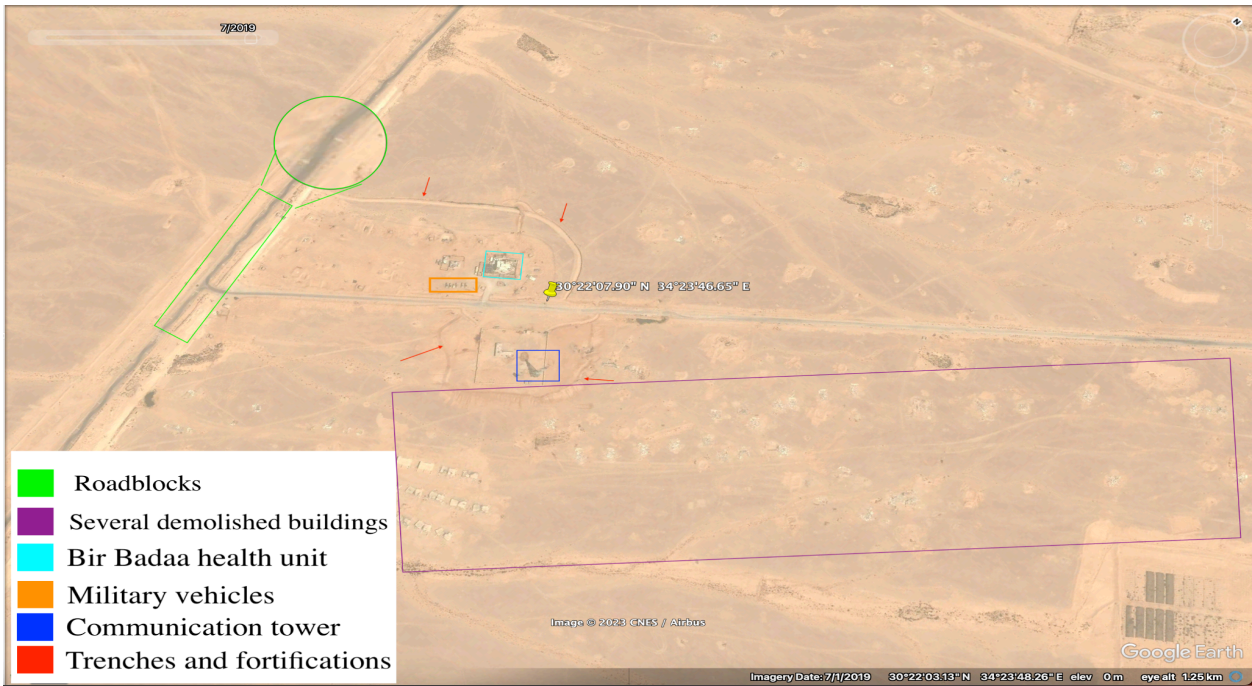


Image 4: An image dated 23 May shows the presence of Egyptian armoured vehicles (green rectangular) and tanks (red rectangular) in 2021. Source: Maxar.

2. School attacks and demolitions

The Foundation's research has uncovered multiple military attacks on schools, their staff, and students between 2013 and 2023. As a consequence of these attacks, at least 186 students were killed and 268 injured, and at least 21 staff were killed and 20 injured.⁸ It was common for the Egyptian armed forces to enter school premises in search of Sinai Province fighters.

School buildings were routinely attacked during the conflict, including by Egyptian armed forces. For example, **Al-Farouk Omar School** was shelled by a tank and attacked by gunfire while students were inside the classroom. The top floor was damaged by shells while bullets hit the windows of the students' classroom, according to a teacher who witnessed the incident.⁹ The teacher remarked afterwards that while it was taking place, 'death was closer to us than the classroom door'.¹⁰ The tactical context of attacks such as these clearly indicate violations of international humanitarian law.¹¹

Many other schools were shelled by the Egyptian armed forces during the war decade. We have even collected evidence of the aerial bombardment of school buildings. *Mines of the Future* documents the military destruction of 73 schools in North Sinai, almost all of which were destroyed by state armed forces from 2013 to 2023..¹²

A typical story is that of the preparatory and primary schools of **Naga' Sheibana**, near Rafah. After the closure of both schools for military reasons, they were subjected to artillery shelling and aerial bombardment by the Egyptian armed forces in late 2017 and early 2018, according to our interviews with three residents. Open-source satellite images, reproduced in the report, confirm that both schools were completely destroyed between January and August 2018.¹³

The border village of **Al-Mahdeya** experienced a similar episode. As described by eye-witnesses, after the Egyptian army commandeered the primary school for tactical reasons as the highest point in the village, the air force bombed the preparatory school as the second-highest point, in order to prevent its use by ISIS insurgents. Satellite imagery confirms the complete destruction of the school.¹⁴

Official narrative

False official claims that schools remained intact is belied by a letter in 2021 from the member of the Egyptian Parliament for North Sinai and the representative of the pro-Government party Homat Al-Watan to the Minister of Education. The letter, posted on the MP's Facebook page, demanded the urgent building of additional classrooms, noting that the armed conflict had already destroyed 50 of the 72 schools in Sheikh Zuweid City.¹⁵ The MP also referred to the same information in a session of the Egyptian Parliament, posting a video via his Facebook page.¹⁶

⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

⁹ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 30.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 34.

¹² Ibid., p. 36.

¹³ Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 43-45.

¹⁵ [Letter from a member of parliament to the minister of education](#), posted on the official Facebook page of MP Ibrahim Abu Shaira, 25 May 2021.

¹⁶ [Speech by MP Ibrahim Abu Shaira in the Egyptian parliament regarding education in North Sinai](#) [video], official Facebook page of MP Ibrahim Abu Shaira, 1 November 2021.

Leaked official documents obtained by the Foundation proved that, as of 2016, the government held a formal record of at least 24 schools closed for security reasons or destroyed.¹⁷ Interviews with Ministry of Education employees and leaked official documents, reproduced in our report,¹⁸ reveal that staff had been instructed not to divulge this information publicly, nor to reveal the number of students out of education as a consequence.¹⁹

Attacks by non-state armed groups

The ISIS affiliate Sinai Province also often raided and destroyed schools. The group targeted staff and planted explosives in areas used by children to play. The Foundation has documented the consequent deaths and injuries of several children.²⁰ We have also collected evidence showing that four schools were completely destroyed by the group.²¹

We encourage the Committee to review our [interactive map](#) showing all affected sites and exclusive footage as additional evidence.²²

3. Child recruitment

North Sinai

With reference to the activity of non-state armed groups, the Committee further asked the State party (List of issues, 15(e)) for information on the recruitment or use of children and the assistance provided to them.

At paragraph 89 of its replies, the State party cited the Constitution, article 200 of which outlaws all non-state armed groups, but did not deny that they exist. In fact, government media outlets have repeatedly praised the work of pro-government militia. Amnesty and [Human Rights Watch](#) have documented serious violations by these groups that meet the criteria for war crimes.²³ The fact is that the Egyptian armed forces and pro-government militia repeatedly recruited and used children in hostilities in North Sinai throughout the armed conflict. Contextual factors included deteriorating economic conditions and the large number of adolescent children deprived of education due to the destruction and military use of schools.

Our report, [I was afraid... I was only 17: The untold stories of child soldiers in Egypt. North Sinai](#), published in August 2023, documents several cases of informal recruitment and use of children by state armed forces and pro-government armed groups.²⁴ *Mines of the future* documents further cases of child recruitment.

A typical story is that of Mazen Naim Saad Abu Zeina (pictured below), who participated at the age of 14 in an armed group on joint operations with the Egyptian army. Footage shows Mazen armed

¹⁷ SFHR, [Mines of the future](#), 2024, p. 24.

¹⁸ Ibid., see appendices.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

²⁰ Ibid., Chapter V.

²¹ Ibid.

²² SFHR, [‘Education map’](#), 2024.

²³ HRW, [‘Egypt: New Videos of North Sinai Executions. Rein in Army-Aligned Militias; Prosecute Those Responsible’](#), 30 August 2022.

²⁴ SFHR, [I was afraid... I was only 17: The untold stories of child soldiers in Egypt. North Sinai](#), 2023.

and in military uniform. A relative confirmed that Mazen had left school to fight with the Egyptian army and was given a weapon, which he found difficult to carry due to its weight.²⁵



On 3 May 2022, Ibrahim Al-Menaie (pictured below) appeared with an injured arm in a [video](#) of an interview circulated on social media. Ibrahim said that he was 16 and his injury was caused by a landmine explosion while on reconnaissance in North Sinai.²⁶ Ten days later, the Foundation documented Ibrahim's death by an explosive device while participating in a joint combat operation of pro-government militias and the Egyptian army against Sinai Province in Sheikh Zuweid. The following day, the [official Facebook page](#) of the Sinai Tribal Union (the main pro-government militia) named Ibrahim as one of its 'fighters and heroes' who died in the 'cleansing battle' and announced that the Egyptian would give him a military funeral.²⁷



²⁵ SFHR, [Mines of the future](#), 2024, p. 137.

²⁶ '(Part Eight) The Sons of Sinai are the Correct Number in the Homeland Equation', [YouTube](#), 3 May 2022.

²⁷ Sinai Tribal Union, ['Meanwhile, the people of Sinai are mourning the martyrs of the purification battle...'](#) Facebook, 14 May 2022.

Despite evidence such as this, the State party has told the committee (Replies, paragraph 89) that 'no substantiated reports' exist of child recruitment by non-state groups in North Sinai. In fact, the Foundation has sent clear evidence of such recruitment to the Minister of Defence and the President of the National Council for Human Rights in Egypt, without reply from either. We later made this letter public.²⁸ In September 2023, the US government included Egypt for the first time in its list of states using children in military operations, on which the Egyptian government has yet to comment.²⁹

Nationwide

The State party has given the Committee inconsistent information on the minimum age for voluntary recruitment into its armed forces, as follows:

- OPAC Declaration (2007): 16 years.
- State party delegation in dialogue with the Committee (2011): 18 years.³⁰
- State party report in the present reporting cycle (2023): 16 years.³¹
- Replies to the List of issues in the present reporting cycle (2024): 18 years.³²

In fact, the Egyptian armed forces have repeatedly advertised full voluntary military enlistment to children. **This includes children under the age of 16 in violation of its OPAC obligations.** The Egyptian armed forces kept officially announcing in years from 2017 to 2023 that the minimum age at which it will permit voluntary recruitment is 15. In March 2023, the Ministry of Defence published the following on its website:

'Lieutenant General Mohamed Zaki, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and Minister of Defense and Military Production, approved the announcement of the acceptance of a new batch of volunteers to join the ranks of the Armed Forces, as well as guides (trackers) for the benefit of the Border Guard Forces, as of Saturday, 1 April 2023 [...] and the age must not be less than 15 years and not more than 25 years upon joining the armed forces...'³³

('Trackers' are Bedouin people sought for the reconnaissance skills, particularly for the high-risk activities of border patrol.)

The Committee asked the State party to explain this webpage (List of issues, point 15b). The State party has not replied.

²⁸ See [I was afraid... I was only 17: The untold stories of child soldiers in Egypt](#), North Sinai, 2023.

²⁹ US Department of State, [2023 Trafficking in Persons Report](#).

³⁰ See paras. 17 and 23 of the Concluding Observations, [CRC/C/OPAC/EGY/CO/1](#).

³¹ See para. 250 of the State party report, [CRC/C/EGY/5-6](#). '...the minimum age for conscription into the armed forces is 18 and the minimum age for voluntary recruitment is 16, in accordance with regulations set forth in the law.'

³² See para. 86 of the Replies to the list of issues, [CRC/C/EGY/RQ/5-6](#). 'The activities of [child recruits], in fact, are limited to the study of academic, cultural and behavioural subjects and to the acquisition of scientific and professional skills and to disciplinary training that will qualify them to enter military life once they are no longer children.'

³³ Egypt, Ministry of Defence, [Accepting a new batch of volunteers and contributors to join the ranks of the armed forces](#) [in Arabic], 13 March 2023. Note that Google translate incorrectly translates 'trackers' as 'storytellers'.

4. Access for human rights monitors

At point 15(h) in the List of issues, the Committee further asked about access by third-party monitors to North Sinai, noting that children may be recruited for armed conflict in the region, and asked for information on the investigation and prosecution of such cases, as well as the torture of children there and their forced disappearance.

The State party has not replied.

Despite the dramatic decline in military operations inside Sinai and the final eradication of the Sinai Province armed group in 2022, the Egyptian authorities continue to prohibit the work and movement of independent media and human rights organisations within the Sinai Peninsula almost absolutely.

5. Call for 'listed' status

On the evidence presented here, we believe Egypt's record meets the threshold for inclusion on the list of states committing grave violations under the Children and Armed Conflict agenda.

Suggested recommendations

- 1. Immediately cease the use of all schools and their environs for military purposes. Consider acceding to the Safe School Declaration.**
- 2. Urgently conduct an independent and thorough investigation into the military use and destruction of education institutions, as well as the recruitment and use of children, by all parties to the armed conflict in North Sinai. Produce a comprehensive plan for reintegrating all children in North Sinai into education, including by accelerating the repair and rebuilding of schools damaged or destroyed during the armed conflict.**
- 3. Cease inviting children below the age of 16 to join the armed forces and desist from their recruitment. Consider raising the minimum age for voluntary military recruitment into the state armed forces to 18.**
- 4. Lift all restrictions on access to North Sinai by independent journalists, human rights observers, and humanitarian relief organisations.**

April 2024