



Organization for Security and  
Co-operation in Europe  
**Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine**

# THEMATIC REPORT

IMPACT OF THE CONFLICT ON EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES AND  
CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN EASTERN UKRAINE

January 2015 — March 2020

July 2020

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the beginning of 2015, the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) has been monitoring and reporting on the impact of the conflict on educational facilities and children's access to education in the conflict-affected areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine as part of its mandate to gather information and report on the security situation and monitor and support the respect for human rights.

In this regard, the SMM's monitoring since 2015 includes observations of damage to educational facilities due to shelling and small-arms fire, the usage of such facilities by the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the armed formations and their presence within 1km of educational facilities, as well as the impact of the conflict on children and school staff. For children living near the contact line, access to education continues to be hampered by security risks posed by shelling, the prevalence of mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) near schools or on their commute to school, as well as school buildings that have been rendered structurally unsafe by shelling and small arms fire.

Ongoing ceasefire violations along the contact line continue to pose a threat to the physical and psychological well-being of children and educators. The Mission corroborated nine civilian casualties (seven children and two adults) of which four were due to shelling in the immediate vicinity of educational facilities and five civilian casualties were due to UXO or unspent ammunition at educational facilities. The lives of children and school staff (most of whom are women) continue to be put at risk due to the presence of positions and equipment less than 1km from educational facilities, as well as the use of educational facilities by the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the armed formations.

Between January 2015 and March 2020, the Mission has confirmed damage to 93 educational facilities in 43 settlements on both sides of the contact line in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In some instances, children were inside the educational facilities when the incidents occurred. With many educational facilities rendered non-operational due to the conflict, many children have to rely on distance learning programmes offered by other educational facilities and, at times, have to cross the contact line to sit exams or meet with instructors. In some instances, children cross the contact line every day to attend classes.

The SMM remains committed to monitoring and reporting on the impact of conflict on educational facilities and children's access to education; however, it continues to face impediments in gathering information, particularly in non-government-controlled areas.

Measures should be taken by the sides to enable the continuity of education in a safe environment and to ensure the civilian nature of educational facilities is preserved, including by intensifying efforts aimed at adhering to commitments to cease fire; regular mine action and awareness raising for students and school staff, and refraining from establishing military and military-type positions in and within the vicinity of educational facilities.

# INTRODUCTION

The SMM is mandated, among other tasks, to report on the security situation and monitor and support respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. This includes monitoring and reporting on the impact of the conflict on the ability of children to access their rights, such as their right to an education. For children living near the contact line, access to education continues to be hampered by security risks posed by shelling, the prevalence of mines and UXO near schools or on their commute to school, as well as school buildings that have been rendered structurally unsafe by shelling and gunfire. According to the United Nations' Ukraine Education Cluster, there are over 670,000 schoolchildren across 1,727 schools in government-controlled areas and 1,815 in non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions in need of education-related assistance.<sup>1</sup>

The SMM has been monitoring the ability of children on both sides of the contact line in Donetsk and Luhansk regions to attend classes and enjoy a safe and secure school environment since 2015. In the report, the SMM presents its observations related to damage to educational buildings due to shelling and gunfire; dangers posed by mines and UXO; educational facilities used by the Ukrainian Armed Forces or the armed formations or where positions and equipment are close to educational facilities; hardships faced by children and educational staff; and impediments to the SMM's access to information on educational facilities. The report covers the SMM's observations from 1 January 2015 until 31 March 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Ukraine Education Cluster, Education Cluster Strategy: Ukraine 2019-2020, October 2019. ([https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/uec\\_strategy\\_final\\_eng.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/uec_strategy_final_eng.pdf))

# SMM MONITORING ACTIVITIES OF EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES

Since 2015, the SMM has been monitoring the security situation around schools and educational facilities in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, particularly those close to the contact line. In 2015, the SMM's monitoring was focused on damage to educational facilities due to shelling and small-arms fire. Since 2016, the Mission has progressively widened the scope of its monitoring to include other issues affecting educational facilities, such as the usage of the educational facilities by Ukrainian Armed Forces and by the armed formations and their presence within 1km of educational facilities, as well as the impact of the conflict on children and school staff. In this period, the SMM conducted 649 visits, including follow-up visits to educational facilities. Three hundred of these visits were in government-controlled areas and 349 in non-government-controlled areas. Forty-one percent of the visits were in Luhansk region and 59 per cent were in Donetsk region. In 2016, the SMM focused on assessing damage caused by shelling and small-arms fire and the use of these facilities by military or military-type personnel (see figures 1 and 2 for breakdown of facilities visited); in 2017, the Mission included the challenges faced by educators and children, such as the security challenges and reports of the psychological impact of the conflict; in 2018 and 2019, the SMM further widened the geographical scope of its monitoring to include schools within 15km of the contact line. In the first three months of 2020, the SMM has been following up on reports of damage to educational facilities. By the middle of March 2020,

educational facilities on both side of the contact line were closed due the COVID-19 pandemic. The SMM will resume its follow-up on access to education once facilities are operating and classes have resumed.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1. Educational facilities visited by the SMM 2016 to 2019

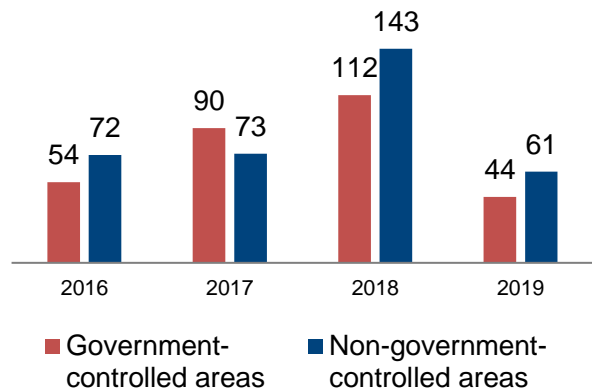
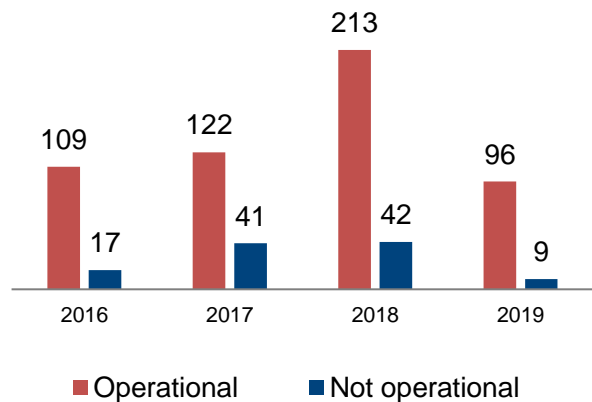


Figure 2. Operational status of educational facilities visited, 2016 to 2019



<sup>2</sup> In government-controlled areas, educational facilities were closed as of 12 March. In non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, schools and universities have been operating in 'distance learning mode' since 19 March and 30 March respectively. Kindergartens were allowed to remain open in non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, though some kindergarten decided to close.

### Educational facilities in Donetsk and Luhansk regions visited by SMM in 2018

**Additional features**

--- Estimated line of contact

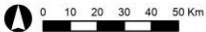
▭ Regional boundary

▭ National boundary

**Type of the education facility**

🟢 Kindergarten

🟡 School



Sources: administrative boundaries - OCHA; roads, rivers - OpenStreetMap; sea - VLIJ (2005), IHO sea areas; other - OSCE

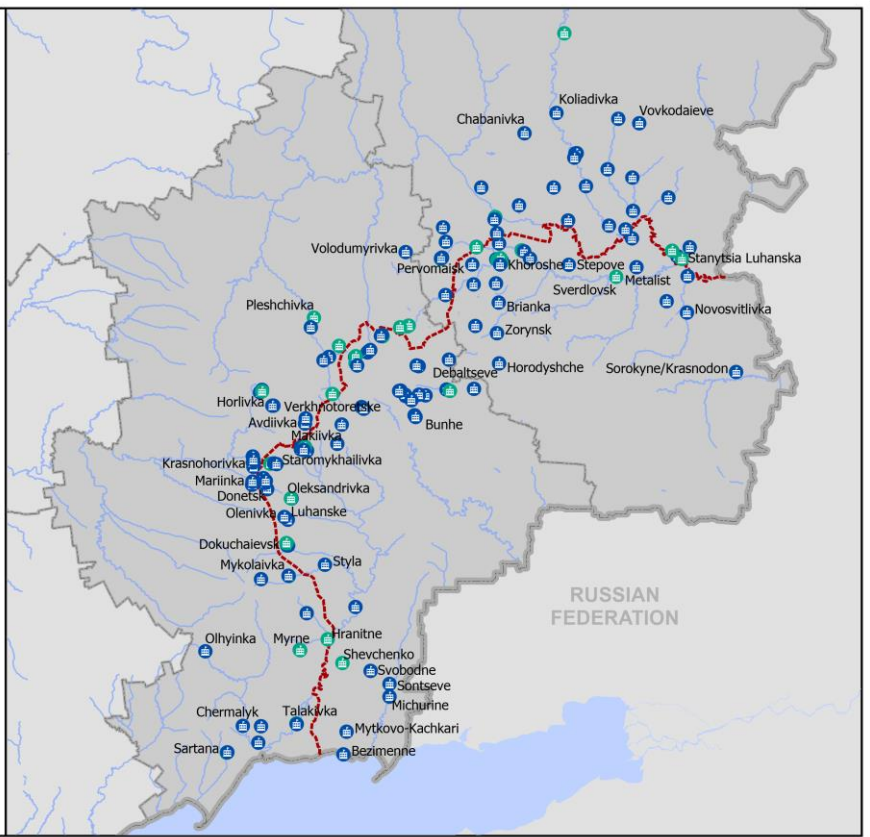
Coordinate system: WGS 1984 UTM Zone 37N

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### Educational facilities in Donetsk and Luhansk regions visited by SMM in 2019

**Additional features**

--- Estimated line of contact

▭ Regional boundary

▭ National boundary

**Type of educational facility**

🟢 Kindergarten

🟡 School



Sources: administrative boundaries - OCHA; roads, rivers - OpenStreetMap; sea - VLIJ (2005), IHO sea areas; other - OSCE

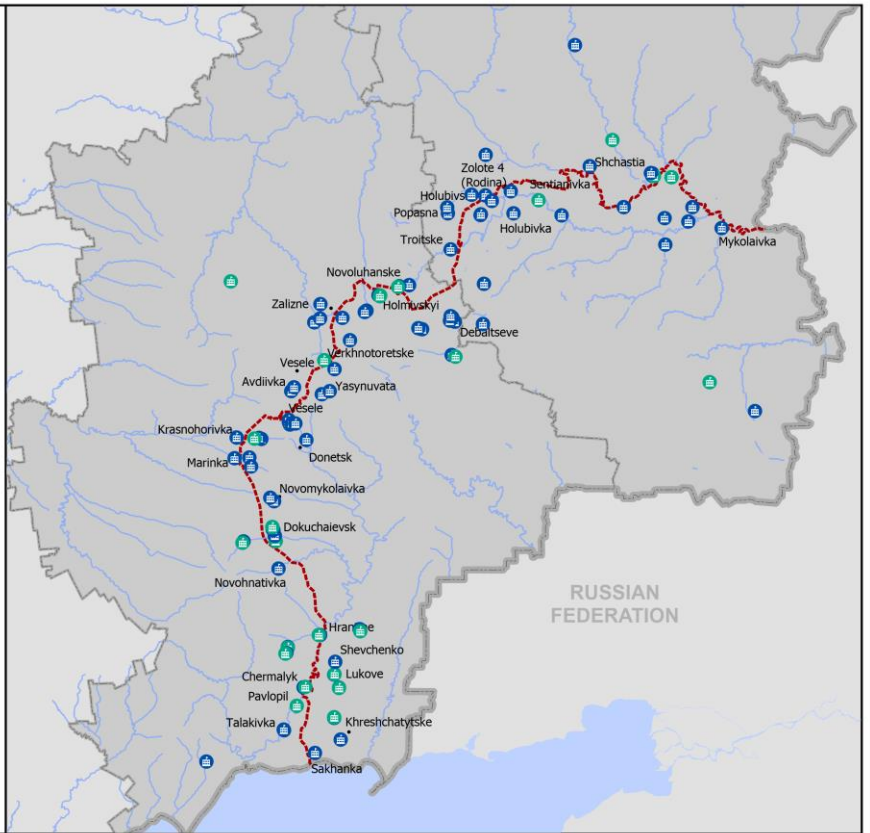
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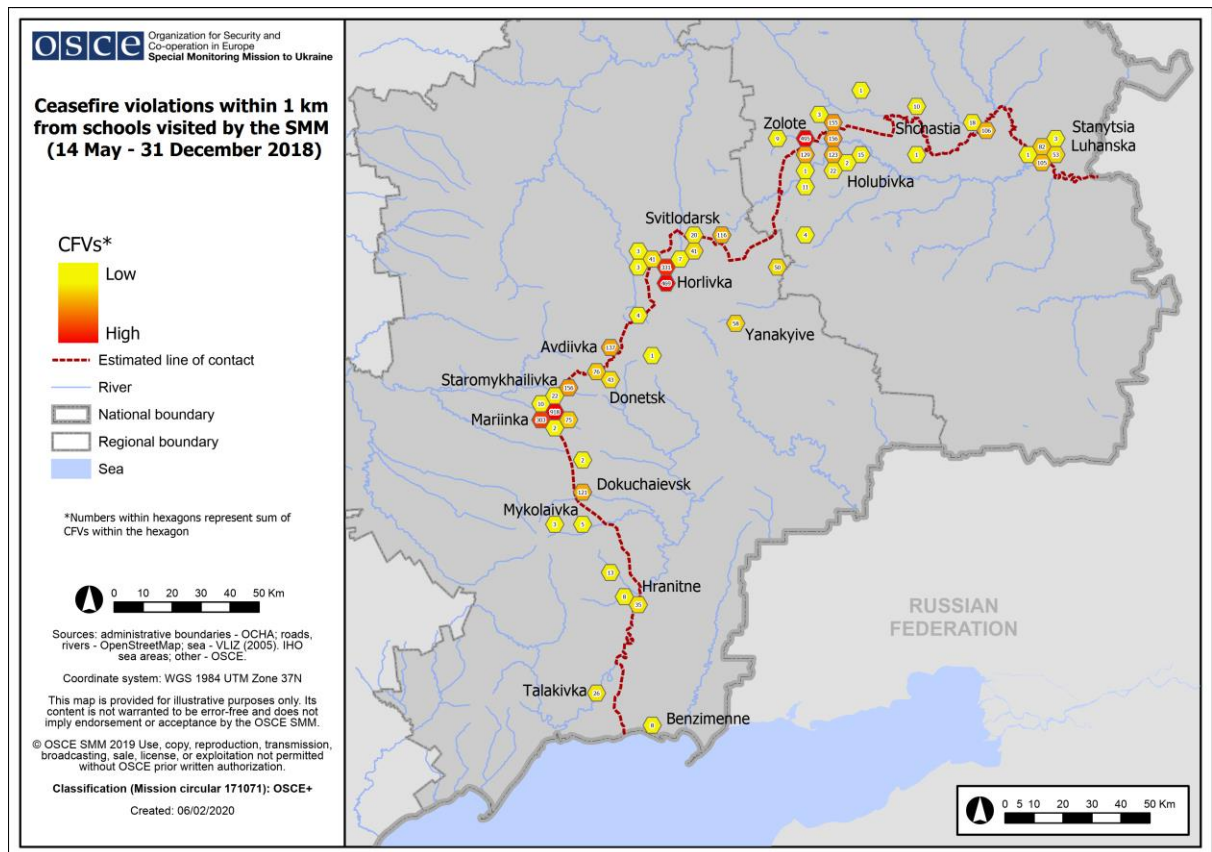
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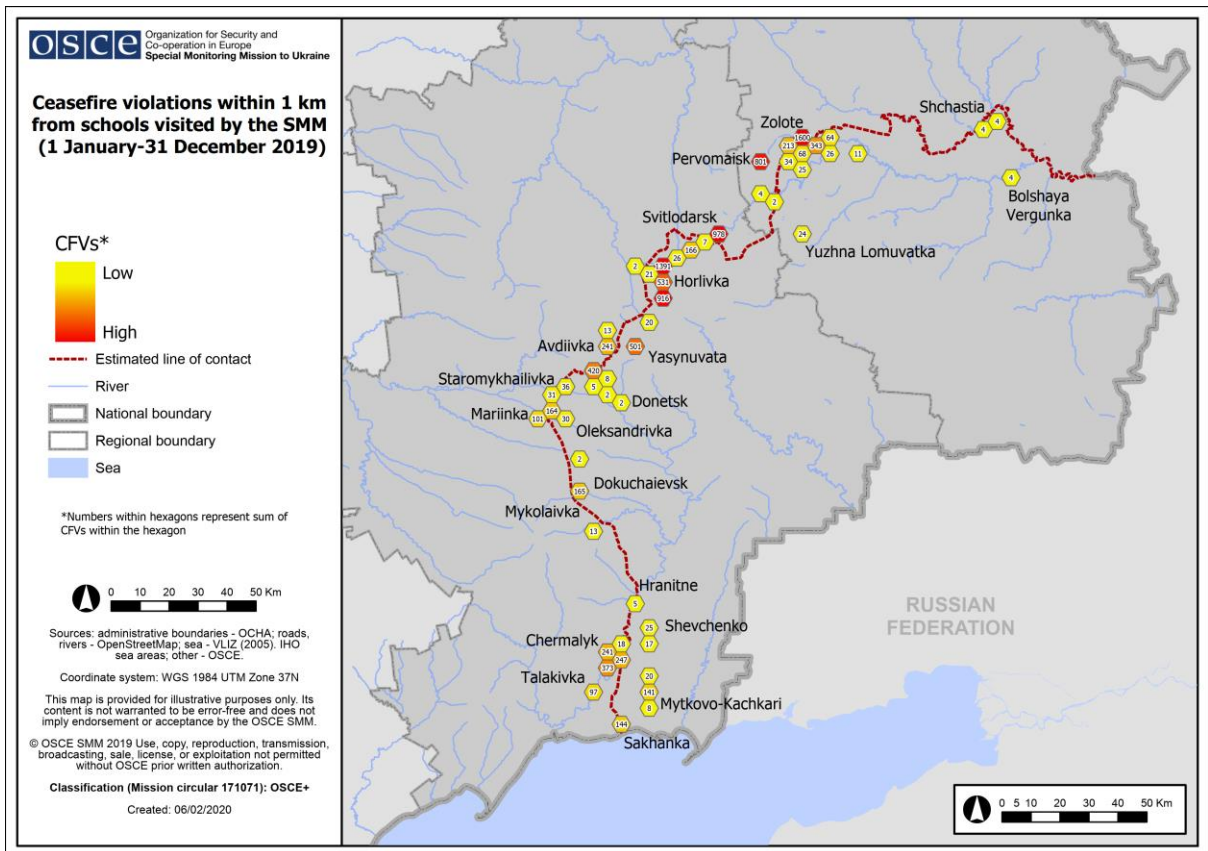
# IMPACT OF SHELLING AND SMALL-ARMS FIRE ON EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES FROM 2015 TO MARCH 2020

Between 2015 and March 2020, the SMM recorded nearly 1.5 million ceasefire violations. The SMM started recording geolocation data for ceasefire violations as of 14 May 2018. Between 14 May and 31 December 2018, the SMM recorded over 312,000 ceasefire violations in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, of which at least 4,600 occurred within 1km of the educational facilities monitored. In 2019, the Mission

recorded around 300,000 ceasefire violations, of which around 10,000 were within 1km of the schools monitored. In 2020, the SMM recorded around 60,000 ceasefire violations of which 2,500 were within 1km of schools monitored by the SMM over 2019. This has resulted in civilian casualties and damage to educational facilities on both sides of the contact line in Donetsk and Luhansk regions.





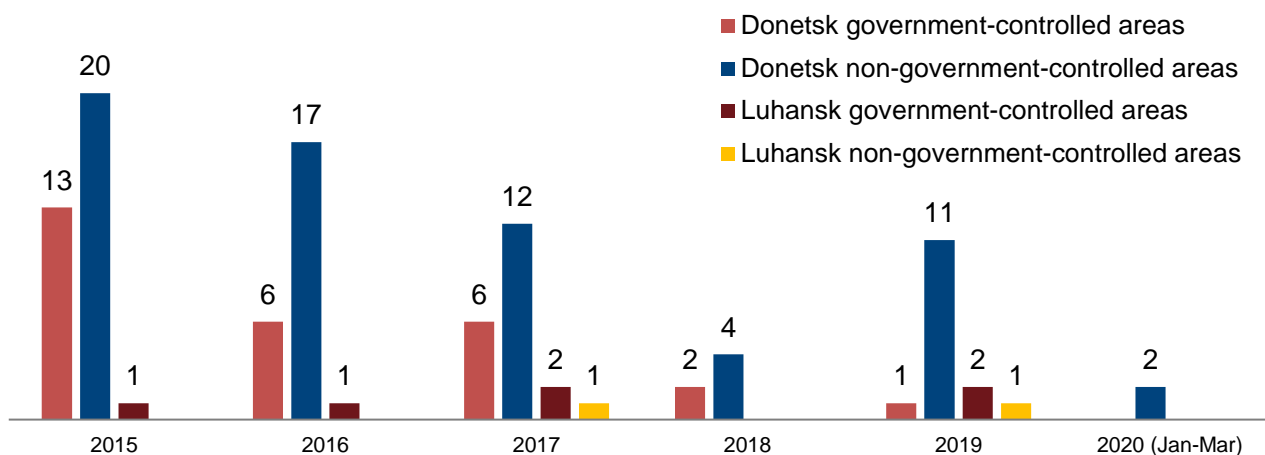


## Civilian casualties in and around educational facilities due to ceasefire violations

Since 2015, the SMM has recorded nine civilian casualties (six boys, one girl, one man and one woman), of whom three were fatalities, inside and in the immediate vicinity of educational facilities. Four of the casualties, including two of the fatalities, were due to shelling. In February 2015, a seven-year old boy was killed when a kindergarten was shelled in government-controlled Bakhmut (formerly Artemivsk), and in August 2015 a 56-year-old female school guard succumbed to shrapnel wounds at school No. 25 in non-government-controlled Horlivka when it was hit by shelling.

On 17 May 2018, the father of a student (43-year-old man) was injured near school no. 11 in government-controlled Svitlodarsk during shelling. Most recently, on 21 March a 17-year-old girl was injured by shelling in the playground of a school in non-government-controlled Oleksandrivka. The other five casualties, all boys between the ages of nine and thirteen, were caused by explosive devices found near schools. (Please see section on *Dangers posed by mines and other explosive devices* for more information on civilian casualties).

Figure 3. Educational facilities damaged by kinetic activity 2015 to March 2020 (observed by the SMM each year)



### Damage to educational facilities

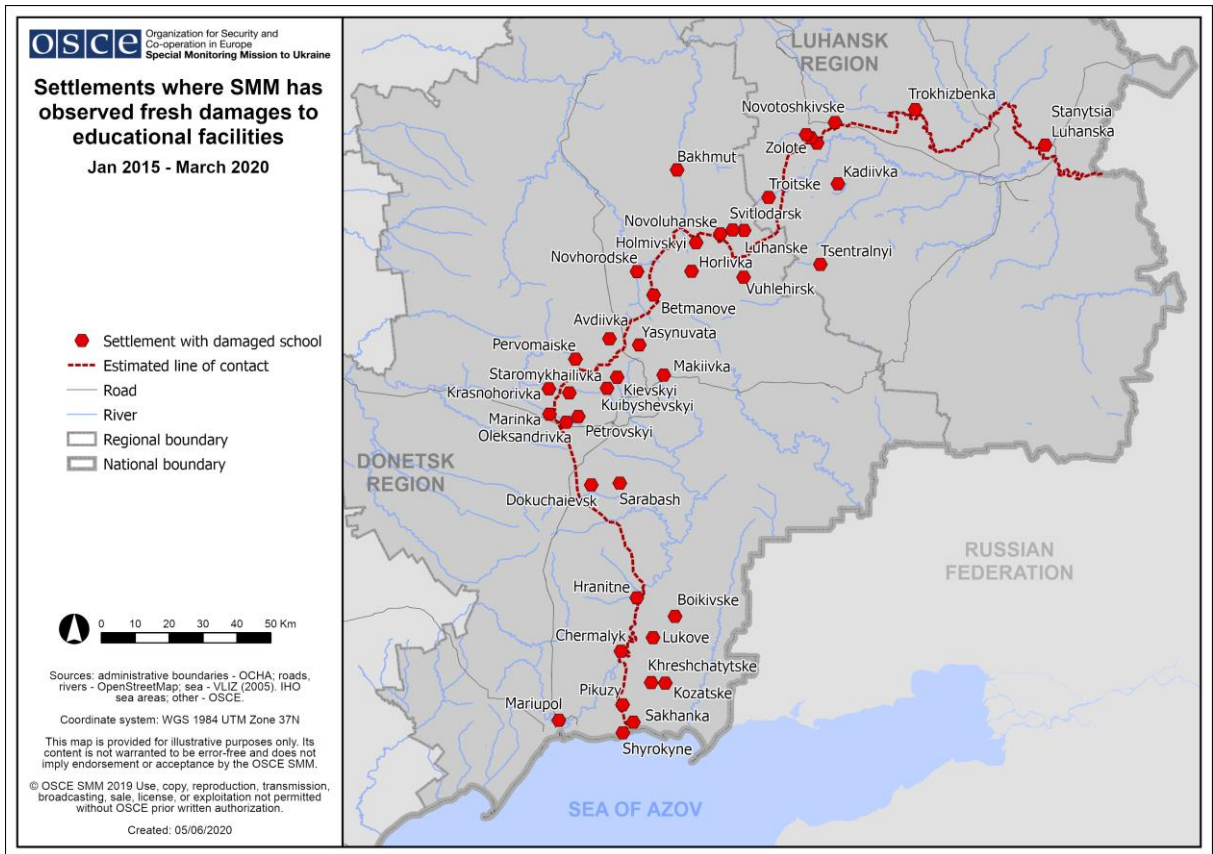
Since 2015, the SMM has been recording damage to schools as a result of shelling and small-arms fire (see *figure 3* above). Overall, the Mission has observed and reported damage to 93 individual educational facilities across 43 settlements (some schools were repeatedly damaged over multiple years and on numerous occasions within each year). Between 2015 and 2018, the Mission recorded a downward trend in the number of educational facilities being damaged by shelling and small-arms fire, recording 34 educational facilities damaged in 2015 and six in 2018. However, in 2019, this number rose, with damage being recorded to 15 educational facilities. In the first three months of 2020 the SMM reported damage to two educational facilities.



School in Shyrokyne damaged by shelling in 2015

As noted above, a number of educational facilities have sustained damage on multiple occasions. For instance, in 2018, school no. 11 in government-controlled Svitlodarsk sustained damage caused by shelling on two occasions (January and May). In non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk region, boarding school no. 27 in Dokuchaievsk sustained damage due to shelling on three occasions between February and May 2018. In non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk region, boarding school no. 27 in Dokuchaievsk sustained damage due to shelling on three occasions between February and May 2018. In non-government-controlled areas of Luhansk region, school no. 4 in Zolote 5/Mykhailivka sustained damage caused by shelling and small-arms fire on 15 occasions between 25 December 2018 and 31 December 2019. Due to the volatile security situation, the school was closed on 8 February 2019 and reopened on 5 March 2019. The school provides service to 87 school-aged children and 12 pre-school aged children from the non-operational kindergarten located 800m from the school.

Between 1 January 2016 and 31 March 2020, the SMM received information of alleged damage to eight educational facilities in addition to the ones mentioned above but was not able to follow up on reports due to security considerations.



## Repairs to damaged educational facilities

In 2018 and 2019, the SMM noted that 12 educational facilities (three in government-controlled areas and nine in non-government-controlled areas) were still in need of repair as a result of conflict-related damage that had occurred months before. The administrators of kindergarten no. 191 and school no. 74 in Donetsk city, both facilities non-operational since 2014 and 2015, respectively, told the SMM in September 2018 that they had not been able to secure funding due to the proximity of the facilities to the contact line and the likelihood that they would be damaged again. In government-controlled Popasna, an operational school was damaged due to shelling in 2014. The school administration told the SMM in September 2018 that while some repairs had been

conducted, the Luhansk regional administration did not have the funds to complete the repairs.

On 16 November 2019, the SMM visited the school no. 4 in Zolote-5/Mykhailivka and observed that damage to the walls and windows on multiple stories of the building had not yet been repaired. As noted above, this school has been damaged on 15 occasions since December 2018, mostly due to small-arms fire. Zolote-5/ Mykhailivka and the wider area on both sides of the contact line is a highly volatile area where the Mission consistently records ceasefire violations.

Overall, according to data from United Nations' Ukraine Education Cluster, between January 2017 and June 2019, 398 educational facilities have received aid for repairs for conflict-related damage.<sup>3</sup> According to the UN Education Cluster 2019–2020 strategy, there are 226 educational facilities in need of repair due to conflict-related damage.<sup>4</sup> Staff of some educational facilities told the SMM that they had received support from international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGO) to conduct repairs for schools sustaining conflict-related damage, including two in government-controlled Novoluhanske and non-government-controlled Kadiivka (formerly Stakhanov).

### Recommitments to the ceasefire at the start of the school year

In the context of the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG), the sides recommitted to the ceasefire at the start of the school year in 2016, 2017 and 2018. Following an initial drop in the numbers of recorded ceasefire violations, the Mission observed that the numbers rose again to pre-recommitment levels within a few days or weeks each year. In 2019, the sides recommitted to the ceasefire on 21 July; with trends following a similar pattern.<sup>5</sup> Between 21 July 2019 and the end of the year, the Mission recorded over 1,470 ceasefire violations within 1km of the schools visited by the SMM, 470 of which occurred during the last two weeks of 2019, after the 18 December 2019

reaffirmation to the 21 July recommitment.

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In the early morning some of the children were already in the school and others were still arriving. When the shelling occurred children started immediately taking shelter in the school corridors.

— Civilians speaking to the SMM after shelling in non-government-controlled Staromykhailivka on 14 February 2020

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In some instances, students were present within the premises of the educational facility during the incidents of shelling or small-arms fire. For example, the director of school no. 2 in government-controlled Marinka told the SMM that students had been evacuated to the school basement on 11 April 2017 for 20 minutes during shelling which occurred at around 9:00 a.m. On 21 March 2019, the principal of school no. 116 in non-government-controlled Donetsk city told the SMM that students had been on school premises when small-arms fire occurred at 7:00 a.m. The SMM observed damage to the wall on the north-western side of the school, likely caused by heavy-machine-gun fire. Since 2015, Marinka has been a highly volatile settlement where schools are always at risk of damage due to shelling and small-arms fire and several facilities have been damaged since the start of the conflict.

<sup>3</sup> Education Cluster for Ukraine, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/ukraine/education>. Education Cluster snapshots 2017, 2018, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Ukraine Education Cluster, Education Cluster Strategy: Ukraine 2019-2020, October 2019.

<sup>5</sup> In 2016, the recommitment began on 31 August and the SMM observed an immediate 80 per cent decrease in ceasefire violations; however, within 60 days the number of ceasefire violations exceeded the daily average of the seven days preceding the recommitment. In 2017, the recommitment began on 25 August and the SMM observed a 93 per cent decrease of the ceasefire violations; however, within 29 days ceasefire violations exceeded the levels observed prior to the recommitment. In 2018, the recommitment began on 29 August and the SMM observed a 60 per cent decrease in ceasefire violations; however, within nine days the level of ceasefire violations exceeded the levels observed prior to the recommitment. In 2019, the recommitment began on 21 July and resulted in initial drop of ceasefire violations by 80 per cent compared to levels observed prior to the recommitment. Following 24 days of recommitment, the level of armed violence reached half of the level prior to the recommitment and on 29 August, after the 40 days since beginning of recommitment, it exceeded it.

Later in the year, in April 2019, students and staff were in the above-mentioned school no. 4 in non-government-controlled Zolote-5/Mykhailivka when shelling took place between 9:30 and 10:30 a.m. They were forced to take cover in the school's shelter and only emerged at 1 p.m. after a piece of UXO had been removed from the school grounds. In 2020, residents of non-government-controlled Staromykhailivka told the SMM that on 14 February shelling had started early in the morning just before classes were about to start. Children in the school had to shelter in the corridors while others were caught out in the open as they made their way to the building. On 19 February, an SMM unmanned aerial vehicle spotted a probable crater in a football pitch around 80m from the school building.

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My grandchildren were playing near the school when the shelling started. I gathered them and took them inside the house. They are still in shock, cannot sleep, and I am worried about them.

— Woman in her 50s speaking to an SMM patrol who were assessing a school in damaged due to shelling in government-controlled Zolote-2/Karbonit, March 2019

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# DANGERS POSED BY MINES AND OTHER EXPLOSIVE DEVICES

The presence of mines and other explosive devices remains one of the most serious risks faced by the civilian population in the conflict-affected areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Article 6 of the Memorandum of 19 September 2014 and the TCG's Decision on Mine Action of 3 March 2016 proscribes the laying of new mines and stipulates the removal of all previously laid mines, as well as the mapping, marking and fencing-off of contaminated areas and the provision of mine-risk education to civilians.



Remnants of ammunitions collected at a school in non-government-controlled Oleksandrivka

From 1 January 2016 to 31 March 2020, 11 children died and 56 were injured due to mines and other explosive devices (15 in 2016, 20 in 2017, 21 in 2018, ten in 2019, and one in 2020), 87 per cent being boys.<sup>6</sup> Five of those casualties occurred at educational facilities due to UXO or unspent ammunition. In March 2016, at school no. 4 in non-government-controlled Dokuchaievsk, two 13-year-old boys were injured, one of them severely, following the explosion of

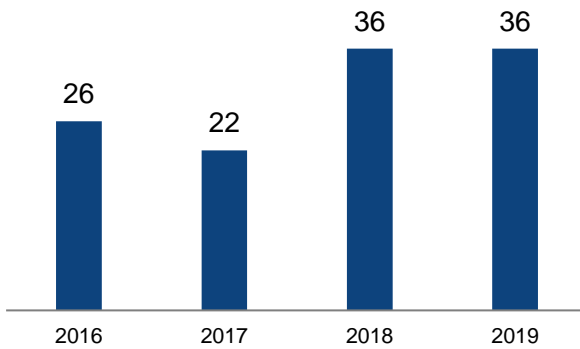
ammunition from heavy-machine gun that one of the boys had brought to the classroom. In November 2017, a nine-year-old boy was killed and two boys (aged nine and ten) were wounded when a piece of UXO they had found in the playground of school no. 110 in the Petrovskyi district of non-government-controlled Donetsk city detonated.

The issue of mine action has consistently been on the agenda of the Working Group on Security Issues (WGSi) of the TCG. The SMM Chief Monitor, in his capacity as the Co-ordinator of the WGSi, has continuously emphasized its importance and at the beginning of 2019, following the SMM's efforts, the sides agreed to provide security guarantees for the inspection and mine clearance of areas within a radius of 1km from some educational facilities located close to the contact line. To that end, from 6 to 12 February 2019, the SMM facilitated and monitored adherence to localized ceasefires to enable demining activities near four schools and one kindergarten in government-controlled Hranitne, Mykolaivka, Zolote-4/Rodina and Stanytsia Luhanska, as well as at three schools and two kindergartens in non-government-controlled Holmivskyi and Olenivka. This notwithstanding, the SMM cannot confirm whether or not these areas are free of mines or UXO. In the first three months of 2020, the sides did not request any security guarantees for localized ceasefires for inspections and demining work near educational facilities. As such, the SMM was not involved in facilitating and monitoring localized ceasefires for this purpose.

<sup>6</sup> The SMM only began to systematically record civilian casualties from 2016 onwards. Of the 67 child casualties, 58 were boys and nine were girls (51 occurred in government-controlled areas and 16 in non-government-controlled areas). Seventy per cent (47 cases) of the total cases occurred in Donetsk region, and the remainder in Luhansk region.

# EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES CLOSE TO MILITARY OR MILITARY-TYPE POSITIONS AND HARDWARE (LESS THAN 1KM)<sup>7</sup>

Figure 4. Operational educational facilities with military or military-type presence within 1km



Military and military-type presence close to educational facilities exposes education infrastructure to damage and destruction and puts the lives of children and teachers at risk.

In 2018 and 2019, the Mission observed an increase in the number of instances when weapons and positions were observed less than 1km from operational educational facilities, compared with 2016 and 2017 (see *figure 4* above). In 2019, within 1km of 36 functional educational facilities (21 in government-controlled areas and 15 in non-government-controlled areas), the Mission observed:

- Training areas;
- Usage of civilian and administrative buildings by the Ukrainian Armed Forces and by the armed formations;
- Military and military-type compounds and installations.

In some instances, the SMM observed military and military-type presence about 100–150m from educational facilities. In government-controlled areas, the SMM observed a Ukrainian Armed Forces training area within 1km of an operational school. In non-government-controlled areas, an armed formations compound was approximately 150m away from a local school and, at another location, the school was 500m from a military-type position.

The SMM continues to observe usage of both operational educational facilities and those that are no longer operational on both sides of the contact line. Such presence could turn the facilities into a military target.<sup>8</sup> If the school being used is functional, then the lives of students and staff are in constant danger; however, even if the facility is no longer operational, schools and kindergartens are often located in residential areas putting civilians at risk should the facility be targeted. The usage of non-operational educational facilities could also prevent the facility from being repaired and rehabilitated in order to make the facility operational again. Additionally, the usage of the facilities by armed elements forces children to travel to educational facilities elsewhere. Guidelines developed by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, which includes international non-governmental organizations as well as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Refugee

<sup>7</sup> In line with the “Do No Harm” principle, the SMM will not disclose the locations of military presence or positions within 1 km from functional educational facilities, providing only statistical figures from its observations and impact on children.

<sup>8</sup> See ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law Rule 10. Civilian Objects’ Loss of Protection from Attack, [https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2\\_rul\\_rule10\\_sectiona](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2_rul_rule10_sectiona).

Agency (UNHCR) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), for protecting schools and universities from military use during armed conflict urge all parties to a conflict not to use educational facilities in any way in support of military or military-type efforts.<sup>9</sup>

While the Mission has observed an increase in the presence of military and military-type presence within 1km of educational facilities, there has been an overall decrease in usage of educational facilities in 2019 compared with 2016. In 2016, the Mission documented 18 educational facilities as being used by the Ukrainian Armed Forces or by the armed formations; in 2019 the number had decreased to ten (six in government-controlled and four in non-government-controlled areas).<sup>10</sup> The ten facilities included two functioning kindergartens being used by the armed formations, one of which has been used since 2016. For example, in government-controlled Teple, in 2017, the Mission reported about the partial usage of an operational school. In 2018, the SMM was told by education staff that the military had left the premises in August 2018, which was observed by the SMM during a September 2018 visit. Additionally, members of the armed formations used a school in non-government-controlled Kalynove from 2015 to 2017. The school building sustained damage from shelling and in 2017 the armed formations left the building after repairs started. Currently, the school is a functioning educational facility.

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<sup>9</sup> See Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use During Armed Conflict, December 2014, [http://protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/guidelines\\_en.pdf](http://protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/guidelines_en.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> In 2019: Donetsk region: two in government-controlled areas and three in non-government-controlled areas. Luhansk region: four in government-controlled areas and one in non-government-controlled areas.



# HARDSHIP FACED BY CHILDREN AND SCHOOL STAFF

The conflict also has a negative psychological impact on children and educational staff in settlements near the contact line. School staff and administrators have told the SMM that children suffer from anxiety and have developed speech impediments due to being under constant shelling. In some settlements, children have to cross the contact line in order to attend classes.



School in non-government-controlled Sakhanka, Donetsk region, January 2017

When the SMM visited educational facilities in September 2018, school staff described the toll that the conflict was taking on the children. For example, in government-controlled Zolote-3/Stakhanovets, interlocutors emphasized how the progressive deterioration of living conditions, such as the lack of employment and lack of basic services, in certain areas was having an increasingly negative effect on families and specifically on children. In 2019, the staff of the same school told the SMM that deterioration of living conditions was having a negative impact on the physical and psychological well-being of students.

In non-government-controlled Debaltseve in September 2019, the staff of an educational facility stated that the conflict had heavily

affected children, who often showed fear and reacted negatively when unexpected noises were heard, “even when a door was slammed”. Teachers and school staff told the SMM that they felt stressed and anxious over the safety and security of the children. At kindergarten no. 2 in government-controlled Stanytsia Luhanska, a representative of the school administration told the SMM that some children had developed speech impediments. In early September 2018, a psychologist from government-controlled Volnovakha, who regularly visited government-controlled Chermalyk, a settlement on the contact line, told the SMM that children in this settlement were suffering psychologically and some had developed speech impediments because of the conflict.

As per order no. 127 (1999) and order no. 509 (2018) of the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science, schools throughout Ukraine are mandated to provide psychological services and should have a psychologist or social support specialist on staff. However, in 2018 and 2019, interlocutors in nearly 80 per cent of the schools visited by the SMM stated that no on-site psychologist was available. In government-controlled areas, interlocutors told the SMM that psychological support was being provided by Ukrainian authorities, international organizations or international NGOs. In non-government-controlled areas, interlocutors told the SMM that there was no psychological support available. Such support is not only necessary for the children but also for the teachers, school administrators and support personnel.

## Civilian freedom of movement and access to educational facilities

In a number of settlements along the contact line, there are no longer educational facilities available because the schools have closed due to the conflict. As noted in figure 2 (above), the SMM conducted 109 visits to schools that were not operational due to the conflict. In others, the facilities which the children used to visit in neighbouring settlements are now located on the other side of the contact line. In these cases, children have to travel to other settlements either by school bus or by public or private transport. For instance, in government-controlled areas, children from Pavlopil, where the school closed early in the conflict, travel 9km to Talakivka. School no. 42 in non-government-controlled Vuhlehirsk, one of two schools in the settlement, sustained damages due to the conflict in 2014 and 2015 and was rendered inoperable. As of September 2019, the SMM observed that no repairs had been conducted. Most of the 450 pupils who attended the school were transferred to the other school in the settlement which was already operating 100 students beyond its capacity of 400. The remainder of the students now travel to attend classes in several schools in non-government-controlled Yenakiiève, which is about 12km from the settlement. After the school in non-government-controlled Nikishyne was heavily damaged early in the conflict, children have had to travel 12km to attend school in non-government-controlled Petropavlivka.

In some instances, children have to cross the contact line to attend classes. In 2018, the SMM was told of two children from non-government-controlled Staromarivka, a settlement 1km from the contact line, who were crossing the contact line to attend a kindergarten in government-controlled Hranitne. As of March 2020, children still have to cross the contact line to attend classes.

In April 2019, the director of a school in government-controlled Verkhnotoretske told the SMM that 24 students were crossing from non-government-controlled areas to attend the school. When the armed formations closed this route from 19 March to 25 October 2019, pupils could no longer attend school. The director of the school in Verkhnotoretske told the SMM that alternative arrangements had been made for the students via online distance learning programmes during this period.



Visible damage on school no. 42 in non-government-controlled Vuhlehirsk, 2018

In Luhansk region, in 2018, administrators in school no.1 in government-controlled Shchastia told the SMM that students from non-government-controlled areas take part in distance learning programmes, with students crossing the contact line at least once a year to sit examinations.

In 2019, administrators in government-controlled areas of Donetsk region told the SMM that over 450 students from non-government-controlled areas were enrolled in distance learning programmes in government-controlled areas. Students enrolled in the programmes generally have to cross the contact line once or twice a year to sit exams – or more frequently if they need to meet with teachers in the programme.

For instance, in government-controlled Marinka, the SMM learned that seven students from non-government-controlled areas were attending school in government-controlled areas as part of a special distance-learning programme. According to the UN Education Cluster in Ukraine, around 19,000 children are engaged in some form of distance learning programme.<sup>11</sup> In 2019, there were around 4,920 children from non-government-controlled areas enrolled in distance learning programmes; 80 per cent of these students were in Donetsk region.<sup>12</sup>

### Schools in government-controlled Marinka and non-government-controlled Dokuchaievsk

In 2019, the SMM spoke to staff of a number of schools in settlements close to the contact line to document their experiences of working in schools during the conflict. Two of the settlements were government-controlled Marinka and non-government-controlled Dokuchaievsk. Both settlements are close to the contact line and have a population of around 10,000 and 25,000 civilians respectively. The SMM has reported damage and civilian casualties in both settlements and the surrounding areas over the years.

On 1 October, the SMM visited school no. 2 in government-controlled Marinka, located in the north-eastern part of the town, close to the contact line. The director of the school told the SMM that it had been damaged several times by shelling and small-arms fire. Before the conflict, the school had 350 enrolled pupils, but by 2017 the number had nearly halved;

however, over the last two years the number of pupils rose to almost 200. The school services not only Marinka but also the surrounding settlements of government-controlled Kurakhove, Heorhiievka and Pobeda. In an earlier visit to the school, the director told the SMM that students had been evacuated to the school basement on 11 April 2017 for 20 minutes during a period of kinetic activity which occurred at around 9:00 a.m.



School in government-controlled Marinka

Between the end of August and October 2019, the SMM visited school no. 3 in non-government-controlled Dokuchaievsk on multiple occasions. Before the conflict, the school serviced around 420 students. In 2014, it became non-operational due to the deteriorating security situation, during which the school building had sustained damage from shelling. Repairs were only conducted in 2015, and the school was gradually reopened. In 2018 and 2019, the number of students rose from 333 to 352. The director of the school (a woman in her thirties) told the SMM that on 29 September 2019, students and staff had to take cover in a shelter in the basement of the school four times during the morning session due to shelling.

<sup>11</sup> UN Education Cluster, Education Cluster Strategy Ukraine 2019-2020, 23 September 2019.

([https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/1\\_ukraine\\_education\\_cluster\\_strategy\\_final\\_23.09.2019\\_eng.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/1_ukraine_education_cluster_strategy_final_23.09.2019_eng.pdf))

<sup>12</sup> Information provided by Ukraine Education Cluster, November 2019.

During an earlier visit on 28 August 2019, the SMM observed the basement shelter, which was lined with wooden chairs and benches and whose windows were stuffed with sandbags to prevent shrapnel and shockwaves from incoming fire from injuring occupants. Kindergarten no. 11 is located a few hundred metres from school no. 3. The director of the kindergarten told the SMM that the facility had no shelter and that during incidents of shelling or small-arms fire the children and staff were forced to gather in the only corridor in the building with no windows. She added that sometimes the whistling sound of bullets could be heard above the yard where children were playing.



Makeshift shelter in the basement of school no.3 in non-government-controlled Dokuchaievsk, 2019

# IMPEDIMENTS TO THE SMM'S ACCESS TO EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES

The SMM has repeatedly faced impediments in gathering information and reporting on educational facilities and children's access to education. In 2016 and 2017, the Mission was denied access to facilities or information about facilities on 20 and 39 occasions, respectively, on both sides of the contact line. The majority of the denials occurred in non-government-controlled areas. In September and October 2018, the Mission faced impediments in accessing the locations of educational facilities or information pertaining to educational institutions on 80 occasions, majority of which occurred in non-government-controlled areas. The SMM faced impediments at 76 out of 143 schools visited in non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions that year, and on four occasions, out of 112 educational facilities visited, in government-controlled areas.<sup>13</sup> The SMM visited some of the schools in non-government-controlled areas on multiple occasions and were repeatedly denied access. School staff often told the SMM that the Mission had to obtain written permission from those in control in order to visit the school and talk to the staff. In some instances, school personnel would not open doors to the SMM, stating that they were not allowed to speak to the OSCE.

On 30 November 2018, those in control of certain areas of Luhansk region, in a letter, warned the Mission against undertaking attempts to establish contact with representatives of educational and other "institutions" "without co-ordination" with those in control. In government-controlled areas, one

interlocutor told the SMM that they needed the approval of their supervisors or the head of civil-military administration in order to talk to the SMM. The SMM experienced impediments at 19 of the 105 schools and kindergartens it visited at the beginning of the school year between September and October 2019. All of the impediments occurred in non-government-controlled areas. SMM patrols that visited the facilities were told that they needed to request "permission" from those in control before providing the SMM with any information.

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<sup>13</sup> See [SMM Thematic report on Restrictions of SMM's freedom of movement and other impediments to fulfilment of its mandate, July-December 2018, February 2019](#).

# CONCLUSION

In the past six years, many children in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine have spent a significant portion of their childhoods under the constant threat of violence and insecurity due to the conflict. Younger children have had all of their schooling under these conditions. Schoolchildren and teachers along the contact line have been at constant risk from shelling or small-arms fire, as well from the mines and UXO that litter the area. They are at risk of death, injury, or of having their schools rendered inoperable due to damage. Overall, between 2015 and 2018, the Mission recorded a downward trend in the number of operational educational facilities being damaged by shelling and small-arms fire; however, there was again a rise in the number of facilities damaged in 2019. A number of these facilities have been damaged on multiple occasions and in need of substantial repair work. In the first three months of 2020, the SMM recorded damage to two operational facilities. Due to their proximity to the contact line and the risk of being damaged again, some schools have found it hard to secure resources to conduct repairs.

In this context, children are among the most vulnerable. Children's basic right to a safe environment to study and live without fear continues to be restricted by the sides. Not only are they affected by the direct consequences of the conflict, such as death and injuries, but many of them are at risk of suffering long-term psychological impact due to their constant exposure to violence along the contact line. In some cases, children and their parents have to travel to other settlements to reach functioning schools and some have found alternatives by crossing the contact line to attend classes. Some schools have resorted to providing instruction via online programs.

In order to ensure the safety and security of children and school staff, the sides need to adhere to their commitments to the ceasefire. The SMM also reiterates the need for the sides to refrain from placing military and military-type assets near schools and kindergartens in order to preserve their civilian nature. The placing of positions or military equipment near schools increases the risk of educational facilities being damaged during shelling and small-arms fire and casualties amongst children and staff. The sides need to adhere to the commitments made in the September 2014 Memorandum and the March 2016 TCG Decision on Mine Action to mark and fence off areas to be cleared of mines, and to provide mine-and UXO-risk awareness training to civilians. Furthermore, the SMM encourages the sides to conduct regular inspection and demining around schools and to provide awareness training for students and staff.