United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 11, 2026

Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Secretary Hegseth,

We write with grave concern regarding the airstrikes on a girls' elementary school that reportedly killed at least 168 people – mostly children – in Minab, Iran during the opening salvo of U.S. and Israeli operations on Iran on February 28.[1] To be clear, the war against Iran is a war of choice without Congressional authorization. Nonetheless, as these military actions continue, the United States and Israel must abide by U.S. and international law, including the law of armed conflict. There must be a swift investigation into the strikes on this school and any other potential U.S. military actions causing civilian harm, and the findings must be released to the public as soon as possible, along with any measures to pursue accountability.

The results of this school attack are horrific. The majority of those killed in the strikes were girls between the ages of 7 and 12 years old.[2] Neither the United States nor the Israeli Government has yet taken responsibility for this attack. On March 4, you acknowledged that the United States was looking into the strikes at the school, saying "all I know, all I can say, is that we're investigating that," but shared no information about a timeline for review nor a commitment to accountability.[3] A New York Times analysis of available evidence suggests that U.S. forces most likely struck the school amid attacks on an adjacent Iranian naval base, despite satellite imagery showing that the building had been walled off from the military base and used as a school since at least 2016.[4] And U.S. military investigators themselves reportedly believe that U.S. forces were likely responsible.[5]

There have also been reports of airstrikes that have hit multiple hospitals, cultural heritage sites, and other critical civilian infrastructure. This includes the use of explosive weapons in major Iranian cities and

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[1] Da Silva, Chantal, et al. "What We Know about the Strike on a School in Iran as the Death Toll Rises." *NBC News*, 5 Mar. 2026, www.nbcnews.com/world/iran/know-strike-school-iran-death-toll-rises-rcna261266?cid=sm_npd_nn_tw_ma&taid=69a81a182cbc2f000129d356&utm_campaign=trueanthem&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.

[2] McClure, Tess, and Deepa Parent. "Minab School Bombing: How the Worst Mass Casualty Event of the Iran War Unfolded – a Visual Guide." *The Guardian*, 3 Mar. 2026, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2026/mar/03/minab-school-bombing-how-the-worst-mass-casualty-event-of-the-iran-war-unfolded-a-visual-guide.

[3] Brumfiel, Geoff, and Alyson Hunt. "Satellite Imagery Shows Strike That Destroyed Iranian School Was More Extensive than First Reported." *NPR*, 4 Mar. 2026, www.npr.org/2026/03/04/nx-s1-5735801/satellite-imagery-shows-strike-that-destroyed-iranian-school-was-more-extensive-than-first-reported.

[4] Browne, Malachy, and Aaron Boxerman. "Analysis Suggests School Was Hit amid U.S. Strikes on Iranian Naval Base." *The New York Times*, 5 Mar. 2026, www.nytimes.com/2026/03/05/world/middleeast/iran-school-us-strikes-naval-base.html.

[5] Stewart, Phil, and Idrees Ali. "Exclusive: US Investigation Points to Likely US Responsibility in Iran School Strike, Sources Say." *Reuters*, 5 Mar. 2026, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-investigation-points-likely-us-responsibility-iran-school-strike-sources-say-2026-03-06/.

populated areas, including the capital, Tehran, which is home to approximately 9 million people. As of March 10, 2026, there have been over 1,245 civilians killed and over 12,000 civilians injured in the war, according to the U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA).[6] Massive civilian casualty incidents like the attack in Minab are not only detrimental to the Iranian people, who have already suffered so much at the hands of its own government, but they also undermine U.S. national security interests. These concerns are compounded by the reported use of artificial intelligence tools to select and prioritize targets in Iran.[7]

These civilian harm events are not taking place in a vacuum. As Secretary of Defense, you set the tone for U.S. military conduct, and your recent comments send a clear message of disregard for the laws of war. On March 3, you said that Operation Epic Fury would have "no stupid rules of engagement." On March 4, you said while describing U.S. military operations in Iran that there will be "death and destruction from the sky all day long."[8] This rhetoric only serves to endanger civilians, including American citizens, in the region and around the globe. The United States is a party to the Geneva Conventions and bound by international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution. These are binding and non-negotiable standards designed to protect innocent human life, and it is unacceptable for the Secretary of Defense to suggest otherwise.

Your comments reflect a broader pattern of policies abandoning the Defense Department's commitment to minimizing civilian harm in U.S. military operations. Under this administration, budgetary and personnel cuts at the Department have robbed military commands of crucial resources to prevent and respond to civilian casualties, including at U.S. Central Command and the Civilian Protection Center of Excellence, which supports commands in this work and was codified into law with bipartisan congressional support.[9] You have also removed senior, nonpartisan Judge Advocate General (JAG) officers who provide essential legal guidance to U.S. service members, particularly regarding compliance with the law of armed conflict and U.S. policies aimed at reducing civilian harm. These actions, combined with your comments and the horrific reports of civilian casualties stemming from the war against Iran, suggest the administration has abandoned its duty to protect civilians.

We request answers to the following questions regarding the February 28 attack on the elementary school no later than March 18, 2026*:*

1. Did U.S. forces conduct the strikes that struck the girls' school in Minab, Iran on February 28, 2026? If not, did the United States play any role in planning, coordinating, or supporting the strikes?

    a. If U.S. forces carried out the strikes on the school, what was the intended target? What led to the errant strike? At what command level was authorization granted? What weapons and systems were used in the strikes?

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[6] Schneid, Rebecca. "More than 1,000 Civilians Killed in U.S.-Israeli Bombing of Iran, Rights Group Says." *Time*, 4 Mar. 2026, time.com/7382536/iran-civilians-killed-girls-school/.

[7] Copp, Tara, et al. "Anthropic's AI Tool Claude Central to U.S. Campaign in Iran, amid a Bitter Feud." *The Washington Post*, 4 Mar. 2026, www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2026/03/04/anthropic-ai-iran-campaign/.

[8] Berman, Lazar. "Hegseth: Complete Control of Iran's Skies to Be Achieved within a Week; 'death and Destruction from the Sky' Will Follow | The Times of Israel." *The Times of Israel*, 4 Mar. 2026, www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/hegseth-complete-control-of-irans-skies-to-be-achieved-within-a-week-death-and-destruction-from-the-sky-will-follow/.

[9] Horton, Alex, et al. "Pentagon Moves to Gut Operations Focused on Reducing Civilian Harm." *The Washington Post*, 4 Mar. 2025, www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/03/04/trump-hegseth-pentagon-firings-civilian-harm/.

b. What analysis was done to determine the purpose of the building? When was this analysis completed? What measures were implemented to reduce the risk of civilian casualties? What was the intended military objective? Were AI tools used in planning or executing these strikes?

c. What analysis, if any, led the U.S. military to conclude that the expected civilian harm would not be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated?

2. You said U.S. forces would follow "no stupid rules of engagement." Are you complying with rules to prevent the commission of war crimes? If so, what procedures are in place to implement those rules?

3. What steps has the U.S. military taken to prevent and mitigate civilian harm in its operational planning and targeting? Was a “no-strike list” established prior to the commencement of U.S. military operations in Iran?

4. Have any U.S. military operations in Iran utilized, or will any utilize, artificial intelligence tools, and if so, provide specifics of how they are being used and for what purpose? What human verification and redundancy policies are in place, if any, to evaluate the accuracy and legitimacy of AI-generated targets? Please provide a copy of any procedures service members use to verify AI-generated targets and recommend them for execution.

5. What role do civilian harm mitigation and response (CHMR) staff at CENTCOM play in operational planning and targeting? How has CENTCOM compensated for the reduction in resources dedicated to this effort, including the loss of dedicated civilian harm mitigation teams?

6. The U.S. has reported that it struck over 1,000 targets in just 24 hours.[10] Given this volume, the compressed timeframe, and the presence of targets in populated areas, what steps and precautions has the U.S. taken to ensure compliance with the laws of war during these strikes? How has the U.S. implemented established CHMR policies and practices?

Sincerely,

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

Brian Schatz
United States Senator

[10] “US Military Says It Has Struck over 1,000 Iranian Targets.” *The Times of Israel* , 1 Mar. 2026, www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/us-military-says-it-has-struck-over-1000-iranian-targets/.

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CC: Platte B. Moring III
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