

A strong resolve to end violence against health care

Open letter

To all United Nations Member States:

We continue to sound the alarm. Scores of health-care workers are being killed or injured while caring for sick and wounded men, women and children during armed conflicts. Countless are prevented from carrying out their duties.

We must do more for them and for the civilian populations affected by this unacceptable situation. It's a matter of life and death.

Firm action is needed to stop the violence against health-care providers, the bombing of hospitals and the destruction of ambulances that prevent entire communities from receiving life-saving services. These acts of violence exacerbate the impact of war on people, bringing more deaths, more disabilities, higher disease rates and greater physical and mental suffering. The consequences of these acts will be felt for decades. It is time to reaffirm that wars have limits.

That is why we, as members of and partners in the Health Care in Danger initiative, welcome the action taken by the UN Security Council to adopt a resolution on this issue. This resolution represents a vital opportunity – one that must not be missed.

Today, 3 May 2016, we call on all UN Member States to wholeheartedly support the measures detailed in UN Security Council Resolution S/280 and those produced under the Health Care in Danger initiative.

We appeal to all UN Member States, in line with the resolution adopted by the Security Council today, to reaffirm the relevance of international humanitarian law – a sound body of law which seeks to bring humanity to an inhumane situation. In particular, we urge all UN Members to adopt specific measures for the protection of health-care delivery that would ensure greater compliance with international humanitarian law.

Governments should review and, where necessary, introduce domestic legislation to prevent violence against patients, health-care personnel and facilities, and medical vehicles. Health-care staff are present in areas of conflict in order to care for the sick and wounded, regardless of their affiliations and based solely on need. They must not be punished for doing their jobs. These dedicated professionals have a key role in upholding the principle of humanity in war.

It is essential that those attacking or preventing health-care delivery be held accountable and brought to justice. We urge the adoption of specific measures to achieve this. For example, criminal, disciplinary or administrative sanctions could be incorporated into countries' domestic legislation.

We urge States to ensure that other domestic legislation applying to health-care personnel, including criminal laws, is consistent with their ethical duties and that it adequately protects the independence and impartiality of health-care provision.

Another key measure is to revise military rules of engagement and operational practice and procedures to ensure that recommendations and measures for the protection of health-care delivery are included and that military personnel are trained accordingly. We urge States to make this commitment.

The Health Care in Danger initiative is led by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and supported by experts and professionals from different backgrounds, including those working on the front line, governments, the armed forces, humanitarian agencies, international professional associations and health-care services. Together we have formulated substantive recommendations and identified practical measures that, if implemented by all those concerned, would increase the protection of health-care services in armed conflicts and other emergencies.

We shared with the Security Council members a document outlining the ethical principles of health-care provision in times of armed conflict and other emergencies. It was endorsed last year by six major health-care organizations representing over 30 million professionals and is aimed at protecting patients and those providing health care.

A key objective of the ethical principles is to ensure that health-care workers are not coerced into carrying out work that is contrary to the ethical standards of their profession. Their primary task is to preserve physical and mental health and to alleviate suffering, without discrimination of any kind. Patients are patients, no matter where they come from or what side they are fighting on.

We urge all UN Member States to take the recommendations developed under the Health Care in Danger initiative, and the ethical principles, into consideration for future multilateral initiatives.

The Security Council resolution sends an important signal. It recognizes the importance of international humanitarian law and, in particular, the sanctity of health-care delivery in times of conflict. Through this resolution, the Council members are demonstrating to the world that violence against health care is a serious humanitarian problem that needs to be addressed at the highest level, and that urgent action is needed to reaffirm the Geneva Conventions, to which all States are party.

We urge all UN Member States to respond to our appeal and to join the Council members in affirming their strong resolve to end violence against health care. There is and there must be a place for humanity in time of war.

3 May 2016

Signatory organisations:

Afghan Red Crescent Society
Argentine Red Cross
Australian Red Cross
Belgian Red Cross
Canadian Red Cross
Chilean Red Cross
Colombian Red Cross
Czech Red Cross
Egyptian Red Crescent
Estonian Red Cross Society
International Committee of Military Medicine
International Committee of the Red Cross
International Council of Nurses
International Federation of Medical Students' Associations
International Hospital Federation
Iranian Red Crescent Society
Kazakh Red Crescent
Lebanese Red Cross
Magen David Adom
Mali Red Cross
Nigerian Red Cross Society
Norwegian Red Cross
Palestine Red Crescent Society
Qatar Red Crescent
Red Cross of Serbia

Senegalese Red Cross Society
South Sudan Red Cross
Spanish Red Cross
Swedish Red Cross
Swiss Red Cross
Timor-Leste Red Cross Society
World Federation for Medical Education
World Medical Association
Yemeni Red Crescent Society