

71st Session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean

Doha, Qatar, 14–17 October 2024

Update on emergencies in the Eastern Mediterranean Region • Emergencies in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

The International Council of Nurses (ICN), representing over 28 million nurses worldwide, acknowledges the progress report on health issues facing populations affected by disasters and emergencies. The report highlights that the region continues to face a significant burden from multiple hazards, yet the growing needs and associated risks remain inadequately funded. ICN stresses the importance of strengthening preparedness for all hazards, emphasizing a well-prepared and protected health workforce is crucial to effective emergency response.

To enhance emergency response and resilience, ICN recommends the following actions:

1. Workforce capacity-building and surge preparedness

Strengthening the health workforce's capacity to respond to emergencies is critical. This involves not only increasing the number of health workers available during crises but also ensuring they have adequate continuous education, tools, and infrastructure to provide care in emergency environments. Nurses, who represent about 59% of the total health workforce globally, are central to these efforts. ICN calls for the active involvement of nurses in emergency preparedness initiatives, including surge capacity planning. This requires enhancing professional development of nurses in disaster response, triage, and crisis management, ensuring they can respond to mass casualties, disease outbreaks, and other emergencies efficiently and effectively. Enhancing nurses' skills in emergency care, mental health support, and trauma management is crucial to improving overall emergency response capacity.

In addition, ICN advocates for integrating basic disaster preparedness into nursing curricula to ensure that all nurses are equipped to respond to emergencies. Building

a responsive and agile nursing workforce will help ensure that healthcare services remain operational and effective during crises, ultimately saving lives and reducing long-term health impacts.

2. Protection of the health workforce and safeguarding their rights

A key aspect of ensuring the health workforce's ability to respond to emergencies is protecting health workers and safeguarding their rights. According to World Health Organization (WHO) data, attacks on health workers and facilities have sharply increased, with a 75% rise in incidents resulting in death or injury over the past three years. This has led to a staggering 240% increase in deaths of healthcare personnel and patients. Such attacks have devastating consequences, not only for the individuals directly involved but also for the health systems they support.

ICN strongly advocates for the protection of health workers and facilities, emphasizing that they must never be targeted in conflicts or emergencies. Health workers have a duty to provide care impartially, without regard for political or ideological differences, and they must be allowed to carry out their work safely and without fear of violence. The protection of health workers and facilities is enshrined in international humanitarian law (IHL), particularly in the Geneva Conventions. ICN stresses that placing health workers and facilities in harm's way is not only unjustifiable but also a violation of international law.

Moreover, ICN urges Member States to uphold the rights of health workers, ensuring they are compensated fairly and, adequately resourced and supported in their mental and physical well-being during and after crises. The protection of health workers is essential for the continued provision of healthcare services during emergencies, as their ability to work safely and effectively is a cornerstone of emergency response efforts.

By investing in workforce capacity-building, surge preparedness, and the protection of healthcare personnel, communities in the Eastern Mediterranean Region can better respond to the growing challenges posed by disasters and emergencies. ICN is committed to working with Member States in the region to achieve this.