# Health care in conflict: the nursing perspective

Conflict of any kind is a violation of the right to health and right to life. It has a profound impact on the physical, mental, spiritual and social wellbeing of combatants, civilians and health care workers. In conflict zones, the demand for health care services escalates dramatically, while access to quality health care often diminishes due to the damage inflicted on health systems. People in conflict zones have an inherent right to access health care, and health workers, including nurses, have the right to be protected and respected in these environments and must never be a target. Nurses have a professional duty to uphold the right to health at all times and in all settings, working tirelessly to ensure that health needs are met and that this fundamental right is not compromised. Delivering care in conflict settings is exceptionally challenging and can severely impact the health and wellbeing of those providing it. The nursing profession has a critical responsibility to advocate for the protection of nurses, health care workers and health services, and to call for an end to violations against the health and wellbeing of those affected by conflict.

There has been a significant increase in armed conflict across multiple regions worldwide. According to the United Nations, two billion people live in places affected by conflict and six out of seven people worldwide are affected by feelings of insecurity.[1] Conflicts have different intensity, frequency and form and conflict rates exist on a spectrum with some level of conflict occurring in almost every country.[2] Many conflicts fall outside of a typical understanding of conflict. For example, some countries may be experiencing multiple, deadly, enduring small conflicts. The nature of conflict is dynamic and the changing landscape, including targeted attacks on health care, different forms of violence and new health threats, means humanitarian health services and the protection of humanitarian workers and facilities must rapidly adapt.[3]

Conflict has both direct and indirect effects on health and societal development. There is particular impact among civilian populations who are more vulnerable due to age, gender, health status, physical and psychological resilience and socioeconomic status. Women and children bear substantial morbidity and mortality as a result of armed conflicts.[4] During and after conflicts, negative health outcomes arise from physical injuries, disabilities, increased burdens of infectious and non-communicable diseases, mental health issues, malnutrition and deteriorating sexual, reproductive, maternal and child health, including heightened rates of sexual and

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gender-based violence.[4,5] Conflict also exacerbates poor health and wellbeing in a number of indirect ways including lack of security and safety, abuse, neglect and exploitation.[6] Conflict leads to massive forced population displacement putting these groups at ongoing risk of ill health. The incidents of injury, illness and death in conflict can exceed the response capacity of health care systems which are weakened by destruction of infrastructure, medical supplies, transportation, food and water supply, shelter and communication facilities. The impact of conflicts extends far beyond national borders, threatening global public health and undermining broader efforts toward societal development and stability.

The right to health is a fundamental right of all individuals, regardless of financial, political, geographical, racial or religious considerations, and it should not be compromised in conflict situations. As laid out in the ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses, nurses prepare for and respond to conflicts and inherent to nursing is respect for life and dignity, no matter in times of peace or armed conflict.[7] This respect drives the professional responsibility of nursing toward addressing the impact of conflict on the emergency and long-term health needs of civilian population and wounded combatants. Nurses' and other health care professionals' duty of impartial care is well respected and protected by International humanitarian law (IHL). IHL protects those who are not or no longer participating in armed conflict, including civilians, health care workers and prisoners of war, and regulates the means and methods of warfare to uphold the dignity and safety of all affected individuals.[8,9]

There is often a disregard for IHL, creating unsafe and sometimes deadly work environments for nurses. There has been a significant rise in incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care in conflicts, including targeted attacks, and this humanitarian issue is of critical concern.[6] In 2023, 2562 incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care were documented, a 25% increase from 2022.[6] This included 487 health workers killed, 445 arrested and 240 kidnapped. Violence against health care includes killing, injuring, kidnapping, harassing, threatening, intimidating, robbing and arresting health care workers; attacking, theft of and interference with medical vehicles; killing, injuring, harassing and intimidating patients and blocking, interfering or denying to provide quality care; and bombing, shelling, looting, encircling, forcibly entering, shooting at or into and any other forcible interference with the running of health care facilities.[10] In many countries, looting, threats to health personnel and the obstruction of patients' access to health care are so common that

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they are often not reported.[6] All violence against health care is a contravention to IHL, in particular the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols. [9]

Violence against health care poses a serious threat to health care delivery and to the nursing profession - it not only disrupts short-term health service delivery but may lead to the collapse of a country's health system during and after conflict. This collapse results in immeasurable human and financial burden and causes the degradation of the quality and accessibility of health care. When nurses are left unprotected and unsupported to carry out their ethical and professional duties, the resulting lack of safety can severely impact their mental health and wellbeing. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), burnout and moral injury are extremely common in health care workers working in conflict settings.[11] The risks to health and life have led nurses and other health workers to leave conflict zones. Exodus, injury and death of nurses coupled with existing nursing shortages have devastating effects on already vulnerable health care systems and severely threatens public health. [12]

ICN remains a strong advocate for human rights, particularly in conflict settings, and consistently condemns acts of violence, both historically and in current conflicts. Through its Humanitarian Fund, ICN provides crucial support to nurses working and living in conflict settings, offering physical and psychological assistance to nurses and their families, professional support, and aid for long-term recovery and rebuilding efforts. ICN is also an active member of the Safeguarding Health Care in Conflict Coalition (SHCC) and is closely involved with the Health Care in Danger (HCiD) project, both of which are dedicated to protecting health care services in conflict settings and ensuring the safety and security of health workers and facilities. [13]

## International Council of Nurses' position and recommendations

### As the global voice of nursing, ICN:

- Demands the provision of impartial health care services in all conflict settings.

- Believes that ensuring the safety and protection of health facilities and health workers is fundamental to the provision of impartial health services.

- Considers peace and security to be fundamental to health and development.

- Strongly condemns any and all violence against health care and firmly believes that attacks on health care should never be normalized.

- Stands in solidarity with nurses everywhere working on the frontlines of

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humanitarian health care emergencies.

- Firmly believes that nurses and other health care workers should never be punished for executing their duties in compliance with legal and ethical norms.

- Fully supports The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law. [9,14]

- Firmly believes privileges and facilities afforded to health care personnel in times of armed conflict and other emergencies are never to be used for purposes other than for health care needs.

- Endorses the recommendations set out in the *Violence Against Health Care in Conflict 2023* report and urges all relevant stakeholders to follow these.[6]

- Offers its continued support for the World Health Organization's Global Health and Peace Initiative[15]

**ICN encourages national nurses' associations (NNAs) to:**

- Support international efforts to ensure people's access to health care and the protection of health workers, facilities and transportation in conflicts.

- Speak out publicly when violence against health care in conflict occurs, calling for action by their governments and expressing solidarity with nurses and other health workers who are under or at risk of attack or violence.

- Educate nurses of their right to be protected and respected in delivering health services in conflicts under IHL.

- Contribute to the development of comprehensive programmes to support health workers in situations of violence through guidance on protection and prevention strategies and the provision of security training and psychosocial support

- Actively participate in conflict preparedness, response and recovery plans.

- Support countries in building and strengthening a resilient health system to withstand health shocks and facilitate prompt recovery after conflict. Rebuilding the health care system should be set as a priority after conflicts.

- Lobby governments to find non-violent and diplomatic solutions to resolve conflicts.

- Promote ICN's #NursesforPeace campaign which raises funds for nurses

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working on the frontlines of emergency situations and draws public attention to the associated threats to public health care systems. [16]

- Develop or expand initiatives to educate nurses about the social, economic, environmental and public health consequences of conflict.

**ICN calls on governments and/or global health organizations to:**

- Follow the recommendations set out in the *Violence Against Health Care in Conflict 2023* report, specifically:[6]

  o Strengthen mechanisms to mitigate impacts in the aftermath of violence leading to the suspension of health services, including the pre-positioning of emergency stocks, providing information on alternative health services, assisting individuals most in need to reach health services, and supporting health workers affected by attacks.

  o Expand surveillance and data-collection activities to facilitate the collection of data on violence inflicted on health care and the impact of violence on health staff and communities to inform evidence-based policy, security, and response measures.

  o Ensure that resource allocation and planning are informed by evidence and guided by the voices of those most affected, including health staff and marginalized groups within the community.

  o Provide emergency funds to health workers after episodes of violence and support research to increase understanding of the burdens of providing care in conflict zones.

  o Repeal counterterrorism and other laws that impose criminal or other penalties for offering or providing medical care consistent with the professional duty of impartiality and end the obstruction or prevention of humanitarian medical assistance to all in need.

- Take concrete steps to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 2286.[17]

- Invest in and ensure access to the full range of mental health and psychosocial support for nurses, health workers and individuals living and working in conflict settings.

- Integrate mental health and psychosocial support services into health systems

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strengthening strategies to support sustainable mental health care which is critical in conflict settings.

- Provide training on the protection of health care and related topics for the health workforce including providing safety training in case of attacks; educating workers on their rights and responsibilities; setting up a uniform process for health workers to document any violence against them; and promoting non-violent interactions in health care settings and interactions with patients.[18]

- Undertake cooperative action with local branches of government, UN agencies and non-governmental organizations at national and local levels to provide suitable health services, without discrimination, for all those in need.

- Ensure the immediate provision of humanitarian assistance, including health care, to refugees and displaced persons and facilitate open and coordinated access of international humanitarian organizations in the affected regions.

- Identify health care personnel, medical transport and facilities with internationally recognized symbols such as the Red Cross, Red Crescent or Red Crystal as a visible manifestation of their protection under applicable international law.

**ICN calls on individual nurses in their roles as clinicians, educators, managers, researchers, policy influencers or executives to:**

- Promote public discussion on the impact of conflict on individuals, communities, the health workforce, health systems and public health.

- Work with groups and organizations that develop strategies for action to reduce the impact of conflict on health.

- Act in accordance with relevant international and national law, ethical principles of health care and their conscience at all times. In providing best available care, take into consideration the equitable use of resources.

- Identify and practice strategies to prevent or manage moral distress.

- In or near areas of active conflict or prone to conflict, ensure adequate and ongoing education and training for emergency nurses to learn and maintain emergency core competencies to enable nurses to function effectively in the context of violent conflict and optimize care response outcomes.[19]

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- Include in nursing education and continuing education nurses' rights in conflict situations and their protection as well as the protection of health care under IHL.

- Contribute to research to increase understanding of the burdens on the nursing and health workforce of providing health care in conflict.

- Collect and share data on violence inflicted on health care in conflict, under appropriate safeguards.

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