



ICRC

Statement delivered by Dr. Micaela Serafini, ICRC's Head of Health Unit, to the Subcommittee on Global Health on the issue of health in conflict

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you today.

On the frontlines of conflicts around the world, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has witnessed the devastation and suffering caused by armed conflict and violence. The physical consequences of armed conflict are undeniably harmful, leaving permanent scars that run deep, both physically and psychologically.

The ICRC's commitment to addressing these dire consequences of conflict is unwavering. Our comprehensive health programming encompasses a wide range of critical services, including hospital care, primary health care, first aid, mental health and psycho-social support, physical rehabilitation, and detention programs. Our dedicated medical staff, working in close collaboration with local partners, often find themselves on the front lines, determined to save lives and provide essential care to patients, even when faced with limited resources and exceptionally challenging conditions. Ensuring that health personnel can carry out their duties in safety, without being targeted, harassed, or pressured to act against ethical principles has always been at the core of the ICRC, and strongly present in the work of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

However, amidst these daring efforts, we cannot ignore the harsh reality that health care continues to come under attack. Between 2021 and 2022, the ICRC documented more than 1,200 events across 33 of our operations where the safe delivery of health care was hampered. The most prominent events recorded included armed entries into health facilities, hampering the continued provision of healthcare; attacks causing damage or destruction of health facilities during hostilities; the looting of health facilities, medical vehicles or medicines; combatants or authorities restricting health personnel (such as doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers, people transporting hospital equipment or medicines) from accessing health facilities or the locations where the wounded and sick reside. Our

collective commitment to humanitarian principles and the protection of those who provide care to the wounded and sick in times of conflict is and continues to be undermined costing people's lives.

More than a decade ago, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement launched the Health Care in Danger Initiative

[HCiD - home \(healthcareindanger.org\)](http://healthcareindanger.org)

The initiative aims at addressing violence against patients, healthcare personnel, facilities, and vehicles, and ensuring safe access to and delivery of health care in armed conflict and other emergencies. The emphasis of the HCiD initiative is very much on taking practical action. The ICRC, in close collaboration with the National Societies of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, as well as with the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), has clearly marked its commitment to work tirelessly on the issue, generating awareness amongst different audiences but also directly supporting the implementation of measures to increase the safety and security of health personnel, facilities, and services. The ICRC has developed tools or concrete measures to provide States with practical guidance to influence military practices, build the capacity of health personnel to understand their rights and responsibilities, the impact of violence against healthcare and actions to tackle the problem; develop and promote domestic legislation to safeguard health care services, which encompass not only health-care workers but also the facilities, vehicles and other activities associated with health care, the introduction and enforcement of no-weapons policies at clinics and hospitals, and to strengthen the security and access measures at hospitals to name a few.

The ICRC has been building an international community of concern, bringing together 12 medical and humanitarian organizations who represent 30 million health-care workers worldwide. They are mobilizing to help to influence and change military practice, domestic laws, and safeguard hospitals at the national level. Today, as we gather here to address this pressing issue, it is imperative for all of us to translate words into practical steps to ensure the safety of healthcare services. While statements of political will are crucial, we believe it is especially vital to support the development and implementation of concrete, practical measures, and operational responses at the national and local levels. We must translate these statements into actionable steps that genuinely improve behavior. This responsibility extends beyond State armed forces and non-state armed groups, who must meet their obligations. A political environment in which anyone who is wounded or sick, irrespective of whether they are friend or opponent, deserves to be treated with humanity; and that those caring for them should have special protection. Health professionals need to be able to comply with medical ethics and receive special protection including immunity from prosecution for impartial care.

The ICRC, along with our esteemed partners, will continue to work tirelessly on this critical issue, raising awareness, promoting dialogue, and driving real change on the ground. States should lead by example by adopting measures to strengthen military doctrine, rules of engagement and practice, especially during searches in health facilities and military

operations in the vicinity of hospitals. States should ensure international legal standards to safeguard access to and delivery of health care are integrated into national legislation. And implement preparedness measures to secure health facilities.

Together, we can ensure that even in the midst of conflict, healthcare knows no boundaries, and those who dedicate their lives to healing can do so without fear.

Thank you.

Berlin, 18 September 2023

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