



General Assembly

Distr.: General
24 June 2019

English only

Human Rights Council

Forty-first session

24 June–12 July 2019

Agenda item 4

Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Physicians for Human Rights, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[01 June 2019]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

GE.19-10533(E)



* 1 9 1 0 5 3 3 *

Please recycle 



Attacks on medical facilities and personnel in Syria: Documentation of war crimes and crimes against humanity by Physicians for Human Rights

Summary

The conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic has been characterized by blatant disregard for international laws and norms by all parties to the conflict. Prominent among the profusion of human rights and international humanitarian law violations have been attacks on medical facilities that amount to war crimes, and that could rise to the threshold of crimes against humanity given their widespread and systematic nature. Using exacting research methods, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has documented and mapped 566 such attacks over the course of the conflict (from 2011 through 2018), indicating both indiscriminate attacks affecting patients, health personnel, and facilities as well as the deliberate targeting of medical infrastructure as part of a broader strategy of war. PHR has also documented the killing of 890 medical personnel. The PHR documentation shows that the Syrian government and its allies, including the Russian Federation, have been the primary perpetrators of attacks on medical facilities and personnel. At a time when Syria's northwest is witnessing a renewed assault on health by the Syrian government and its allies, it is more vital than ever to maintain focus on these egregious human rights violations and war crimes and ensure that civilian protection, along with justice, and accountability, are at the center of discussions on the Syrian Arab Republic.

PHR's methodology

PHR has researched, documented, and corroborated attacks on medical infrastructure since March 2011. PHR collected information and verified reports primarily through open source methods, with substantial support from a wide range of sources in the Syrian Arab Republic and the region. For the purposes of its study, PHR has defined "attack" as a violent assault upon a facility resulting in any destruction, damage, or loss of the facility's function, equipment, or medical supplies. PHR's focus has been on attacks on medical facilities that were used for medical purposes at the time of attack, and therefore protected under international humanitarian law.

PHR's key findings

PHR documented and verified a staggering 566 attacks on at least 350 separate hospitals, clinics, and other medical facilities across sources the Syrian Arab Republic between March 2011 and December 2018. Of that total, 509 (or 90 percent) are assessed to have been perpetrated by the Syrian government or its allies, including the Russian military, 34 by perpetrators from various non-state armed opposition groups including ISIS, four by international coalition forces, and 19 by unknown actors. Tellingly, 57 percent of facilities have been attacked more than once, with some subjected to more than five attacks in relatively short time spans. For instance, between 2014 and 2018, the Kafr Zita Specialty Hospital in northern Hama was pounded from the air by the Syrian government and its allies on 13 separate occasions that PHR was able to verify. The nearby, but more isolated, Hassan al-Araj Hospital, established in a cave 22 feet underground for additional security, was targeted on seven separate occasions between 2016 and 2018, the most recent of which was on May 5, during the latest escalation in the northwest. Multiple attacks on single facilities point to intentional targeting by the Syrian government and its allies.

Another indication of the deliberate nature of attacks on health care in sources in the Syrian Arab Republic is the targeting of "de-conflicted" facilities. A significant number of medical facilities whose coordinates were shared with parties to the conflict through the UN's de-confliction mechanism continued to be targeted even after the UN verified their civilian status. On March 20, 2018, the Arbin Hospital was targeted from the air and severely damaged despite having shared its coordinates with relevant parties eight days before. More

recently, the Nabad al-Hayat Hospital in Haas, Idlib, was targeted and completely destroyed on May 5, 2019, even though it was included in the de-confliction mechanism over a year earlier.

In addition to verifying and mapping attacks on health facilities, PHR has documented the killing of 890 health care workers since the beginning of the conflict. As is the case with facilities, most health care workers (90 percent) are assessed to have been killed by the Syrian government and its allies, with 169 deaths attributed directly to torture or execution. Health care workers in Syria have been routinely arrested, kidnapped, detained, tortured, executed, and forcibly disappeared due to their impartial provision of care. Based on existing documentation,¹ many of these medical professionals are assumed to have been targeted by the Syrian government under the banner of anti-terrorism laws 19 and 22, sweeping legislation the regime has deployed to justify its widespread campaign of arrests and detention of civilians. Physicians, nurses, paramedics, and even health care students are among the many who are believed to continue to languish in Syrian government prisons or whose fates remain unknown.

Conclusion and recommendations

International humanitarian law requires special protections for medical personnel and facilities to ensure the functioning of health care throughout a conflict. International humanitarian law also prohibits the targeting of civilians, including wounded combatants receiving care.

Effectively, the protected status of health facilities and providers under international law has been blatantly disregarded by parties to the Syrian conflict, and most egregiously by the Syrian government. Attacks on health care have persisted throughout the conflict, despite the Security Council's adoption of Resolution 2286 in 2016 and repeated international calls for the end of impunity for those responsible.

The consequences of the widespread and systematic assault on health care has been disastrous for Syrian civilians, and its impact is bound to be felt for years to come. The targeting of medical care, like the denial of humanitarian access and the strangling of vital supplies through sieges and other means, has been as intentional and cruelly effective at killing civilians as the tons of ordinance rained down on civilian areas throughout the conflict. When health facilities are destroyed and medical workers are killed, an untold number of people suffer and potentially lose their lives because of lack of treatment: preventable illnesses become life-threatening conditions, minor injuries grow into debilitating ailments, and routine medical procedures become loaded with risk.

- PHR calls on all parties to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic to immediately cease acts of violence against civilian persons and objects in violation of international humanitarian law, and to take all possible measures to protect civilians from the impact of hostilities.
- PHR calls on UN member states, and on the United Nations Security Council more specifically, to exercise all possible pressure to compel the Syrian government to halt its targeting of civilians and civilian structures.
- PHR calls on the Syrian government and other parties to the conflict to account for the fate and whereabouts of missing and detained health care workers.
- PHR calls on the Syrian government and other parties to the conflict to release all health care workers detained for their medical or humanitarian work and allow them to return to their work without restriction or reprisal.
- PHR calls on the Syrian government to cease conflating humanitarian work and free expression with acts of terror or support for acts of terror and to cease its campaign of

¹ [https://www.refworld.org/docid/523c24704.html%20\(Source%20Review\)](https://www.refworld.org/docid/523c24704.html%20(Source%20Review)); <http://www.vdc-sy.info/pdf/reports/1430186775-English.pdf>

arrest, detention, enforced disappearance, and execution of medical workers under the banner of anti-terror laws.

- PHR calls for the continuing support of efforts to document violations of international laws and principles, with justice and accountability as an essential response to such crimes. Sustainable peace and stability in Syria must be built on the firm foundations of a sincere accountability process involving all parties to the conflict.
