



Using Science and Medicine to
Stop Human Rights Violations

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing ***Five Years of War in Syria: Health Care Under Attack***

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Good afternoon. I would like to thank the members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for hosting this briefing on violations of medical neutrality in the Syrian conflict and Representatives McGovern and Pitts for their leadership on these issues.

The extent and systematic nature of the attacks on the health care infrastructure in the context of the Syrian conflict is unprecedented in the age of the modern Geneva Conventions of 1949.

In 2015, Physicians for Human Rights documented 122 attacks on hospitals – by far the largest number in a year since the conflict began in March 2011. In fact, this number accounts for more than a third of the attacks on hospitals and clinics to date.

There have been 358 attacks on 255 medical facilities – 70 by barrel bombs. To be clear: these are attacks which constitute war crimes, either because the facilities were deliberately targeted – violating the principle of distinction – or the attack on the facilities was with indiscriminate weapons such as barrel bombs, violating the principles of precaution and proportionality.

Fully 91 percent of all these attacks were by Syrian government or allied forces. Physicians for Human Rights has been able to confirm 16 strikes on medical facilities by Russian forces.

Over the course of the five-year-old conflict, 20 attacks were by non-state armed groups, including eight by ISIS – two of those carried out by ISIS with the al Nusra Front.

We just finished our confirmation of reported attacks for February 2016. We were able to verify 10 different attacks on medical facilities. February 15th was a particularly bad day. At 8 a.m., the Women's and Children's hospital in Azaz, north of Aleppo City, was struck by a missile which damaged the facility, injured staff and patients, and forced the hospital to close. At 9:30 a.m., an MSF-supported hospital in Hamadiya was bombed. As first responders were rescuing people from the rubble, there was a second round of attacks – an example of a double tap strike; 25 civilians, including eight medical personnel, were killed.

Not long after the attack on the MSF-supported hospital, a SAMS (Syrian American Medical Society)-supported hospital, where victims from the strike on the MSF-supported facility were being taken, was hit. Three people, including a nurse, were killed and the facility was damaged.

February was also a particularly bad month for medical personnel. Physicians for Human Rights confirmed the death of 16 medical workers, bringing the total we have documented over the course of the conflict to 726 – 95 percent by Syrian forces or their allies. And this number does not address the many doctors and other health professionals who have been detained and disappeared.

As with the strategy of besieging towns, bombing schools and marketplaces, the attacks on the health care infrastructure and the targeting of medical workers is aimed at making life unlivable – even unsurvivable – for civilians. This undermines the key goal of international humanitarian law, which is to make conflict a little less hellish for civilians. But in Syria – and now in Yemen – we see the targeting of civilians and civilian objects as an end in itself.

But beyond the making of life hell for civilians, the killing of doctors has two additional devastating consequences. The first is that doctors and other medical personnel are being punished, tortured, disappeared, and killed for providing medical care to those in need, regardless of any element of their identity or political affiliation. Their obligation to provide this medical treatment is at the very heart of the principle of medical neutrality. It is also the key ethic that binds doctors and other medical personnel around the world. The other consequence is that attacks on doctors silence particularly powerful witnesses. When the Syrian government denies its use of chemical weapons, cluster munitions, starvation, or torture, doctors can bear witnesses to these violations because they have seen and treated the victims.

Which brings me to another critical issue. The cessation of hostility is holding – not perfectly – but the number of attacks on civilians has dropped significantly outside of ISIS-controlled territories. However, the impact of the destruction of the health care system continues, with many hospitals and clinics unable to provide anything but the most basic care to people with injuries or illnesses. Additionally, the silent killing of besieged populations continues. Starving people to death may be a slower way to kill people, but it is just as lethal and just as unlawful as targeting civilians with bombs.

The two key elements of the agreement on the cessation of hostilities were to stop the bombing and other combat and to ensure desperately needed life-saving aid, including food, medicines, medical supplies, and equipment, reached those in need.

But, in another violation of international humanitarian law, the Syrian government continues to obstruct the flow of aid to those in need. Even those convoys that are allowed to

proceed often have many medical supplies stripped out. For example, in a report to the UN Security Council yesterday, OCHA detailed how 60,700 medical treatments (trauma kits, antibiotics, and gastrointestinal, psychotropic, and life-saving medicines, among others) were removed from a convoy to Moadamiya on Feb 17. On February 23, the Syrian government prevented delivery of 18,500 medical treatments (tablets and ampoules for mental health needs, 15 burn kits, antibiotics, analgesics, live-saving medicines, and trauma kits, and items for prevention of child malnutrition). OCHA also recently reported midwifery kits being stripped out of an aid convoy. So the quick deaths by bombs may be waning, but the slow deaths through starvation and denial of medical treatment continues.

It is imperative that the U.S. government – as a member of the UN Security Council – call for a full, timely, and transparent accounting of the delivery of supplies to besieged areas, as well as support the rebuilding of the health care system, particular in those governorates that have been most devastated by this patently unlawful campaign. In the longer term, it is critical for the U.S. government to strongly support measures to restore the hard-won standards of the Geneva Conventions, including by supporting prosecutions of those responsible for designing and ordering these attacks on hospitals and doctors.

Thank you.