

BURKINA FASO

Violence Against Health Care in Conflict 2023



**SAFEGUARDING
HEALTH
IN CONFLICT**



**Insecurity
Insight**
Data on People in Danger

Letter from the Chair



The year 2023 was a grim one for violence inflicted on health care. In 2022, the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition identified the highest number of incidents since we began reporting. Yet in 2023 the number was 25% greater, exceeding 2,500.

The intensity of conflicts characterized by pervasive attacks on health care in recent years declined somewhat in 2023, including in Syria, Yemen, and the Tigray region of Ethiopia. As a result, it might also have been expected that the global trend of violence against health care would turn downward. Instead, from the first days of two new and catastrophic wars, one in Sudan and the other between Israel and Hamas, health care came under ferocious assault. In both conflicts warring parties killed health workers, attacked facilities, and destroyed health care systems. Meanwhile, attacks on health care in Myanmar and Ukraine continued at a relentless pace, in each case exceeding 1,000 since the start of the conflicts in 2021 and 2022, respectively. In many chronic conflicts, fighting forces continued to kidnap and kill health workers and loot health facilities.

At the same time, new and disturbing trends emerged. In Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Gaza, Lebanon, Myanmar, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen combatants employed drones to attack health clinics, hospitals, and ambulances. In many conflicts, combatants violently entered hospitals or occupied them as sites from which to conduct military operations, leading to injuries to and the deaths of patients and staff. In many conflicts, the conduct of combatants revealed open contempt for their duty to protect civilians and health care under international humanitarian law (IHL). Israel, while purporting to abide by IHL, promoted a view of its obligations that, if accepted, would undermine the fundamental protections that IHL puts in place for civilians and health care in war.

The one consistent feature of the attacks was continued impunity for these crimes. For more than a decade, despite their repeated commitments, governments have failed to follow through on these commitments and reform their military practices, cease arms transfers to perpetrators, and bring those responsible for crimes to justice.

We need a new approach, starting with stronger leadership from UN agencies and governments willing to join with civil society and the health care community to take far more assertive action to end the scourge of violence against health care. Among other steps, they can press prosecutors domestically and internationally to bring cases of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed against health care, to develop political support for special tribunals to circumvent UN Security Council members' vetoes of referrals to the International Criminal Court, and restrict the sale of arms to forces that commit crimes.

There are some sources of hope. After years of lassitude, the World Health Organization has spoken forcefully against vicious assaults on health facilities and health workers. Civil society groups are exerting pressure to stop arms transfers to perpetrators of violence, while some militaries have launched initiatives to reduce civilian casualties in war. Leaders must build on these initiatives. Ending the suffering of millions of people depends on their doing so.

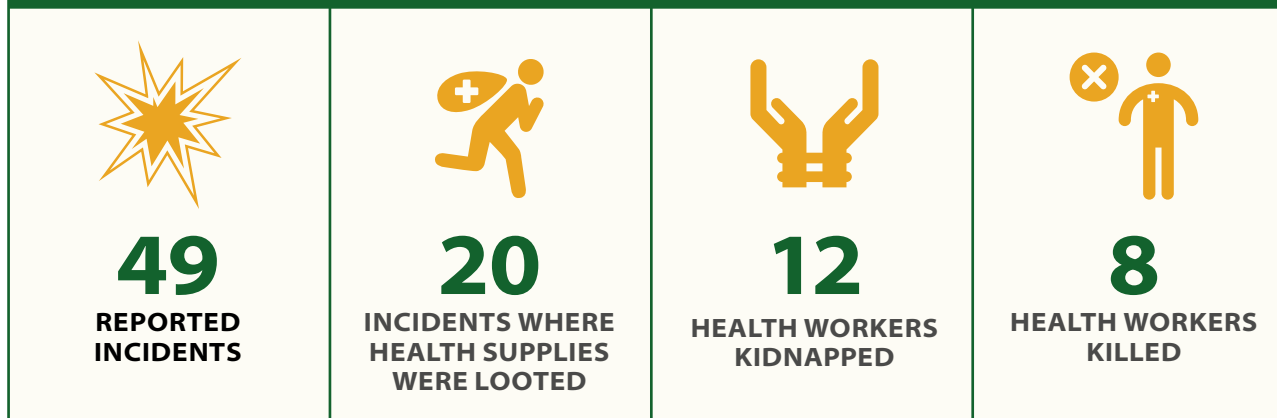
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Len Rubenstein". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Len Rubenstein
Chair, Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition

[↓ Executive Summary](#) | [Full Report](#) | [Recommendations](#) | [Methodology](#) | [Data](#)



REPORTED INCIDENTS AND MOST COMMONLY REPORTED CONCERNS



↓ Source: 2023 BFA SHCC Health Care Data

OVERVIEW

The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition (SHCC) identified 49 incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care in Burkina Faso in 2023, compared to 66 in 2022. In these incidents, 12 health workers were kidnapped and eight killed, and health supplies were looted on at least 20 occasions. This factsheet is based on the dataset [2023 BFA SHCC Health Care Data](#), which is available for download on the [Humanitarian Data Exchange \(HDX\)](#).

THE CONTEXT

Burkina Faso continued to see ongoing political violence in 2023. The [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project](#) reported that killings of people in acts of political violence doubled in 2023 to 8,000. The increase was driven by continued jihadist insurgencies by the Sahelian branch of Al-Qaeda known as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the non-state armed group Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP). In response to these attacks, in April 2023 Burkina Faso's military government, which took power in a coup in September 2022, announced a "general mobilization" to recapture territory lost to armed groups that controlled approximately 50% of the country. This mobilization followed the withdrawal of French troops in February 2023 at the government's request. The government also instituted a "Security First" policy prioritizing the recapture of territory over other areas of government spending such as health care.

Burkina Faso's health ministry faced a dengue fever epidemic, with over 150,000 suspected cases and 709 deaths in 2023. Blockades were imposed by armed groups in at least 46 locations across the country and impacted one million people, while mass forced displacement added to humanitarian needs.

VIOLENCE AGAINST OR OBSTRUCTION OF HEALTH CARE IN 2023

Incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care were recorded throughout 2023 and were spread over ten regions. Reports increased in Centre-Est and Hauts-Bassins regions and continued in Est, particularly in Gnagna province. Incidents decreased in Boucle du Mouhoun, Centre-Nord, Nord, and Sahel regions. A new case was documented in Sud-Ouest involving JNIM fighters shooting at a health center.¹ Half of the incidents took place at health centers.



Known locations of reported incidents affecting health care in Burkina Faso, 2021-2023

High numbers were recorded in Centre-Est and Hauts-Bassins in 2023, compared to Boucle du Mouhoun and Sahel in 2022. Cases continue to be reported from Est, as in previous years.



Health worker killings doubled and the looting of vital medicine supplies increased slightly in 2023 compared to 2022, while ambulance hijackings more than halved. A similar number of health workers were kidnapped in both years. As in previous years, most cases affected health care providers working in national health structures. INGOs were directly affected in one incident in Boucle du Mouhoun.

Most incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care were attributed to JNIM fighters, except those in Sahel region, reflecting the group's growing presence in Burkina Faso. ISSP was named on five occasions, a rise from three in 2022, and Burkinabè armed forces were allegedly responsible for two incidents in Central-Est and Nord. In other attacks, the attackers remained unidentified.

Explosive weapons use

For the first time since the SHCC began monitoring violence against health care in 2016, drones armed with explosives were used in attacks on health care in Burkina Faso. In the first incident, which occurred in April 2023, the Sabouna Health and Social Promotion Center in Nord region was hit in a government military drone strike on the area.² In the following month, an ambulance evacuating a pregnant woman was hit in another government drone strike on a JNIM checkpoint in Centre-Est, which killed her and three health workers.³ These attacks reflect the Burkinabè military's increasing use of Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drones to carry out attacks on Islamist groups, which often results in collateral civilian harm. The munitions designed for the Bayraktar TB2 often have wide-area effects and cause death and destruction beyond the intended target, resulting in reverberating adverse effects on the health sector. The psychological impacts of attacks affect staff and patients in profound ways, creating shortages in health workers and barriers for patients seeking care.

Health supplies looted

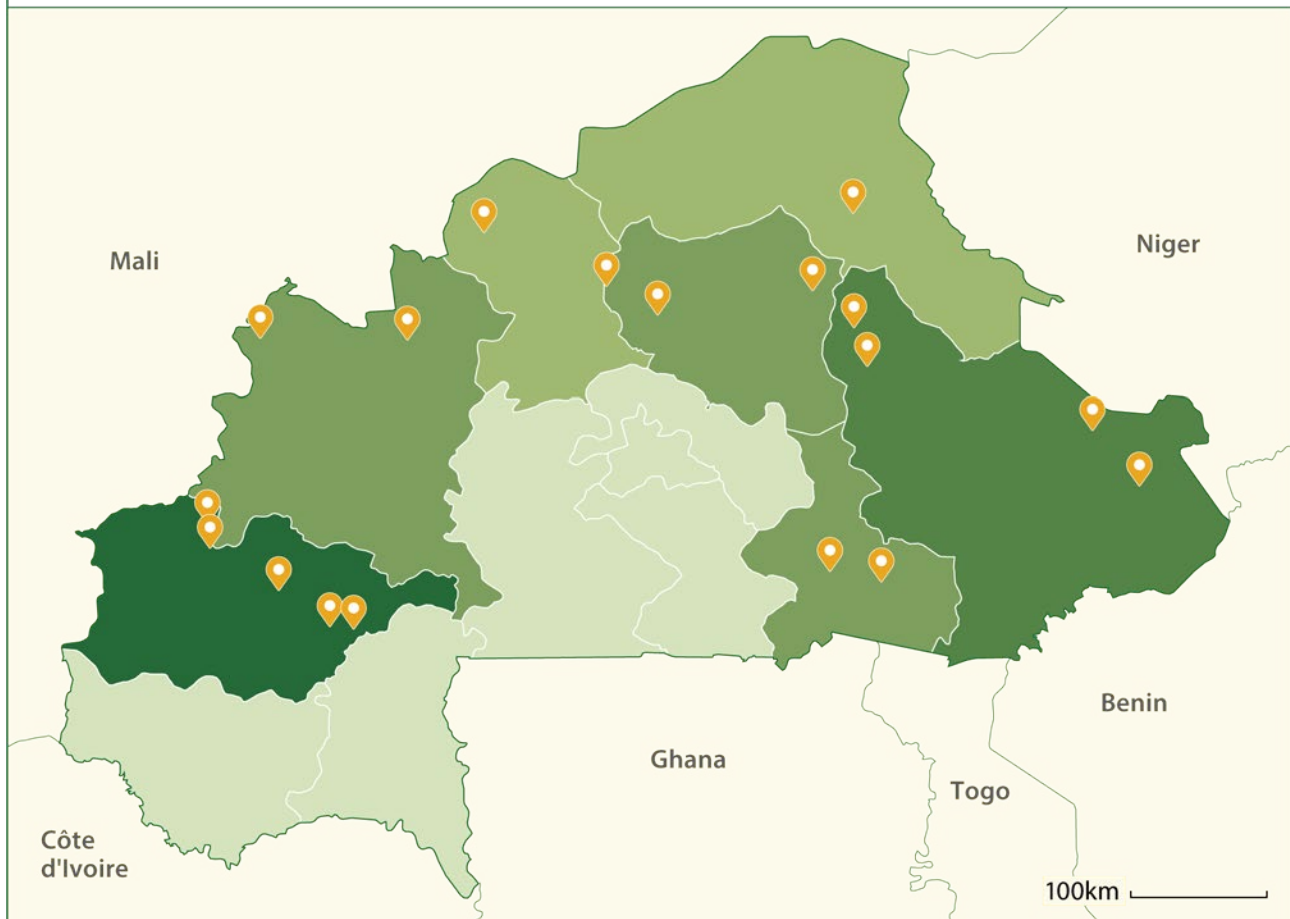
Vital medicine and equipment were looted from health centers, medical warehouses, and pharmacies on 20 occasions in 2023, compared to 15 in 2022. Over half of these lootings took place at pharmacies or pharmaceutical warehouses. Lootings were recorded in seven regions, with new cases in Hauts-Bassins and Centre-Est regions in 2023. Most were attributed to JNIM fighters armed with firearms. On four occasions, JNIM fighters looted medicine from health facilities in Boucle du Mouhoun, Centre-Est, Est, and Hauts-Bassins, then set the buildings on fire.⁴ ISSP fighters in Sahel ransacked and looted a pharmaceutical



warehouse belonging to the Gangaol Health and Social Promotion Center and stole solar panels and a refrigerator from a health center.⁵ In most lootings of health facilities, health workers were not present, suggesting that access to health supplies was an important motivation behind these incidents. The exception was when JNIM fighters broke into a pharmaceutical warehouse, stole medical supplies and a motorcycle, and then set the facility alight before ordering health workers to stop working in the area.⁶ In October, JNIM fighters also repurposed a school in Centre-Est as a health center, allegedly supplying it with medical equipment they had stolen during attacks.

Reported incidents where health supplies were looted in Burkina Faso, 2023

Vital medicine and equipment was looted from health facilities at least 20 times in 2023. Lootings were widely dispersed and were mostly attributed to JNIM fighters armed with firearms.



Health worker kidnappings and killings

Twelve health workers were kidnapped in seven incidents in 2023, similar to the number in 2022. Kidnappings took place between January and May across four regions. Most were attributed to JNIM fighters who kidnapped staff traveling during working hours, a pattern that reflected previous years. ISSP fighters kidnapped a health facility guard in March in Sahel region.⁷ In most cases, staff were kidnapped on their own or with another colleague. The exception was three nurses and an ambulance driver who were kidnapped from their ambulance by suspected JNIM militants in Centre-Est in May.⁸ Three of the 12



kidnapping victims were released within 24 hours, including one released after their abductors recognized them as a medic.⁹ The fates of the remaining staff were not recorded.

At least eight health workers were killed in five incidents in 2023, compared to four in three incidents in 2022. Health worker killings were recorded in Boucle du Mouhoun, Centre-Est, Centre-Nord, Est, and Hauts-Bassins, reflecting a shift from 2022, when all reported killings occurred in Sahel region. Most were traveling to provide medical care to remote areas when they were killed, including two head nurses killed by JNIM fighters in Est and Hauts-Bassins.¹⁰ The exceptions were the previously mentioned health workers killed in the drone strike in Centre-Est, and a health worker killed in a wider attack on civilians by armed men in Centre-Nord in April.¹¹

THE IMPACT OF ATTACKS ON HEALTH CARE

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Health Cluster reported that the deteriorating security situation in Burkina Faso had led to a serious breakdown in the country's health system. By January 31, 2024, 425 health facilities had closed, depriving more than four million people of access to health care. In Centre-Nord region, many health facilities were not operational due to insecurity. Insecurity has had a negative impact on people's health, with epidemic outbreaks reported in most of the affected areas and people suffering from chronic illnesses finding it difficult to access treatment.

In Tougouri department, Namentenga province, Centre-Nord region a mere eight out of 29 health facilities were able to provide services to patients. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported how its health services were suspended for almost a year after two staff members were killed when their vehicle was targeted during an attack in Boucle du Mouhoun region. Following its withdrawal, the organization could no longer provide general health care or sexual and reproductive health care, nor provide support to health workers screening for child malnutrition.

There was a substantial shortage of medical staff in all violence-affected areas of the country. Amnesty International reported that health workers tended to "leave besieged cities due to the hardships, and it is hard to keep them in post due to the risks." An estimated one million people were living in 36 such besieged towns and cities. Dozens of health workers had left their posts because of "attacks and intimidation by armed groups, further reducing the availability and quality of health care." The Amnesty International report also noted how this specifically affected children, the elderly, and others in need of lifesaving health care.

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SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

On February 8, 2023 armed men ambushed and attacked a marked MSF vehicle in Boucle du Mouhoun region resulting in the deaths of two staff members, while two others managed to escape. As a result, MSF suspended its activities in the region except for vitally urgent aid. Analysis of social media sentiment by Insecurity Insight appearing on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) following this incident highlighted how the humanitarian principles – and the principle of neutrality in particular – were misperceived in the online social media space.

In December 2023, following a deadly attack on the town of Djibo in Sahel region by JNIM militants, a viral audio clip alleged that the Burkinabè Red Cross had prior knowledge of the attack and had time to evacuate, thereby implying that inappropriate contact had occurred between the Red Cross and the non-state actor. Sentiment analysis by Insecurity Insight of social media posts highlighted how violence against health care providers can make them more vulnerable to disinformation regarding their intentions.

- 1 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 BFA SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 44895.
- 2 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 BFA SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 44847.
- 3 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 BFA SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 44848.
- 4 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 BFA SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 44898; 40063; 44867; 37709.
- 5 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 BFA SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 44851; 42803.
- 6 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 BFA SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 44898.
- 7 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 BFA SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 44849.
- 8 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 BFA SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 39193.
- 9 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 BFA SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 44881.
- 10 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 BFA SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 39615; 40469.
- 11 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 BFA SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 44848; 38306.

SAFEGUARDING HEALTH IN CONFLICT

The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition is a group of more than 40 organizations working to protect health workers and services threatened by war or civil unrest. We have raised awareness of global attacks on health and pressed United Nations agencies for greater global action to protect the security of health care. We monitor attacks, strengthen universal norms of respect for the right to health, and demand accountability for perpetrators.

www.safeguardinghealth.org

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