MALI

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.

Len Rubenstein
Chair, Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition

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REPORTED INCIDENTS AND MOST COMMONLY REPORTED CONCERNS

41
REPORTED INCIDENTS

29
HEALTH WORKERS KIDNAPPED

Source: 2023 MLI SHCC Health Care Data

OVERVIEW

The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition (SHCC) identified 41 incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care in Mali in 2023, compared to 51 in 2022. At least 29 health workers were kidnapped in these incidents. This factsheet is based on the dataset 2023 MLI SHCC Health Care Data, which is available for download on the Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX).

THE CONTEXT

The situation in Mali continued to deteriorate in 2023 as conflict and insecurity intensified in northern Gao and Mopti regions bordering northwest Burkina Faso (both areas of increasing armed conflict), as well as central Tombouctou. The UN peacekeeping force, MINUSMA, was ordered to leave the country in June, leaving communities in these regions at further risk as fighting increased towards the end of the year.

According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, there was a 38% increase in violence against civilians in 2023 compared to the previous year, with incidents remaining high in northern Mali. Here Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) and the non-state group Islamic State in Sahel (EIS), the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa), and the Russian-government-linked Africa Corps (formerly Wagner Group) private military company (which sent 1,000 mercenaries to support the junta) are in armed conflict.[1] All parties have been accused of human rights abuses and violence against civilians, including attacks on and threats to health care.

Humanitarian needs remained high, with an estimated 32% of the population in need of assistance and protection. Access to humanitarian assistance was challenging, and heightened conflict and insecurity restricted communities' access to health care.

VIOLENCE AGAINST OR OBSTRUCTION OF HEALTH CARE IN 2023

Incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care were recorded throughout 2023 in eight of Mali's regions. High numbers continued to be documented in Gao, Mopti, and Tombouctou, a pattern that reflects the geographic concentration of incidents in previous years. Incidents were also recorded in Kidal, Koulikoro, Menaka, Ségou, and Sikasso regions in 2023.

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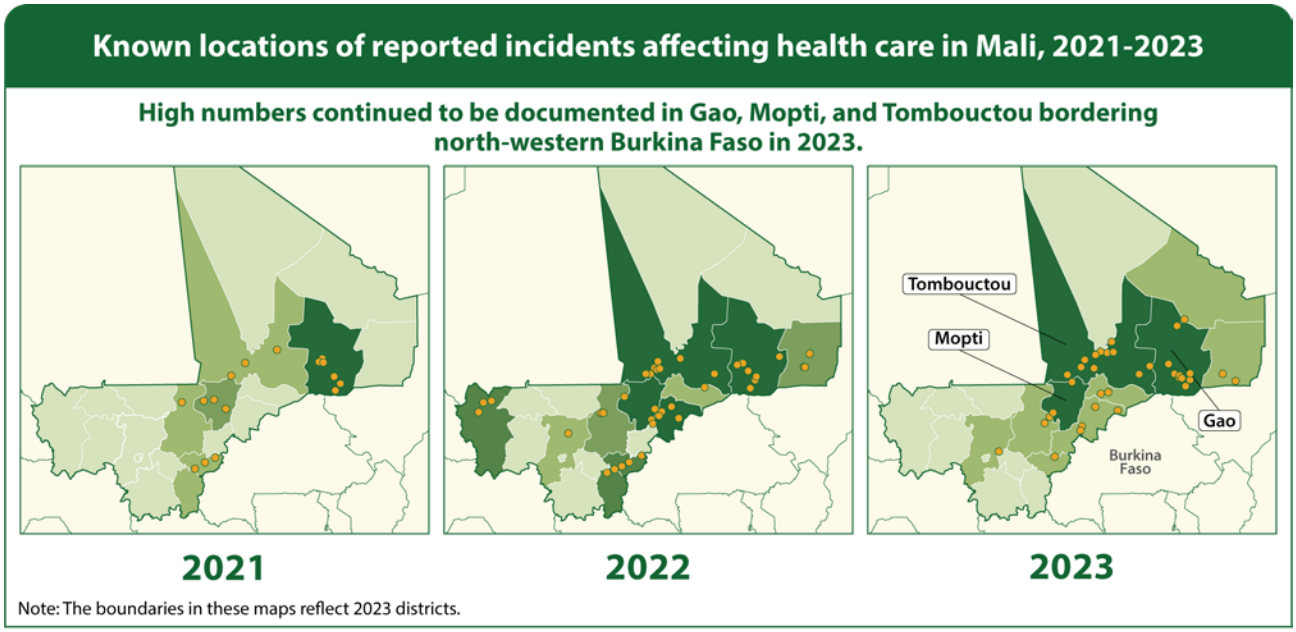

High incident numbers were attributed to JNIM fighters armed with guns in all eight regions except Kidal, reflecting the group's presence across large areas of the country. EIS was named as perpetrator on five occasions, an increase from three in 2022. Eight incidents were linked to Africa Corps in Gao, Mopti, and Tombouctou, a sharp increase from two in 2022, suggesting the group's growing presence in Mali's conflict-affected regions. Four of these eight incidents involving Africa Corps were part of a joint force with FAMa, with one together with the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies militia. This is the first time SHCC had reported an attack on health care by this Gao-based pro-government militia group, which killed two volunteer health workers from the Idourfane community in an attack on civilians in Gao in January.[2] FAMa troops arrested a health worker and five other civilians in Kidal for unspecified reasons and searched the home of a health worker in Gao during a wider security operation.[3] In other attacks, the attackers remained unidentified.

As in previous years, most incidents affected health care providers working in national health structures. NGOs were directly affected in two incidents, and one each affected the United Nations and Red Cross. Half of all incidents occurred while staff were traveling to provide medical care to remote areas.

The majority of cases involved health worker kidnappings and killings, similar to previous years. Health centers were raided, set ablaze, and vandalized on five occasions by FAMa, JNIM, and Africa Corps in Gao, Mopti, and Tombouctou. The actual figure was likely higher and the severity of the problem was likely much greater, because many incidents went unreported.

Health workers kidnapped and killed

At least 29 health workers were kidnapped in 18 incidents in 2023, compared to 26 in 11 incidents in 2022. Most kidnappings were attributed to JNIM fighters, with two attributed to EIS in Menaka.[4] Kidnappings took place while staff traveled to provide medical care to remote areas, although one health worker was seized from their home in Tombouctou.[5] Often the ambulance or vehicle they were in was hijacked, and staff were later released unharmed. Sometimes ransoms were demanded as a condition for their release, suggesting that health workers were targeted for their perceived wealth. Twelve of the 29 kidnapping victims were released within 24 hours. The fates of the remaining staff were not recorded.

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Six health workers were shot and killed in five incidents in 2023, the same as in 2022. Four, including the previously mentioned two health volunteers in Gao, an ambulance driver, and a health center manager, were killed in attacks involving Africa Corps.[6] A nurse and a health center manager were killed in separate EIS attacks in Ansongo cercle (administrative subdivision) in Gao.[7]

THE IMPACT OF ATTACKS ON HEALTH CARE

Mali faces a variety of health challenges, including high maternal and child mortality rates, which are further exacerbated by persistent conflict and insecurity. According to a Malian Ministry of Health survey, approximately 8.8% of the population reside over 15 kilometers from a health center. Access to health care is even more limited in conflict-affected areas. According to a midwife working in a hospital in Mopti region, women often come to the hospital to give birth "as a last resort," primarily due to the difficult and dangerous journey to reach a hospital from rural areas, and there are reports of some patients reportedly not managing to reach hospitals safely. Ambulances transporting patients are often held up on the way to a hospital, increasing journey times, and some areas are not accessible to health workers or NGOs.

Mali faces a chronic shortage of health workers, with an estimated one doctor per 10,000 people. Attacks on health workers further exacerbates this shortage and has left certain areas without an adequate number of trained staff. In November 2023, Médecins Sans Frontières was forced to evacuate its teams in two towns in the Ségou region because it was unable to secure its staff's safety. After this evacuation, health care was no longer available in Nampalari rural commune.

Some areas under the control of non-state armed groups experienced partial or total blockades, including Tombouctou city, which was seized by JNIM in August. The blockades prevented goods and basic necessities from entering by road, river, and air. The city's population was cut off from basic services and the city and surrounding areas were almost inaccessible, forcing NGOs in the area to restrict movement and activities and causing medicine, logistic equipment, and fuel shortages.

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1 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database attribution policy, accessed April 3, 2024.
2 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 MLI SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 38119.
3 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 MLI SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 44897; 41598.
4 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 MLI SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 42170; 44871.
5 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 MLI SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 39796.
6 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 MLI SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 38479; 42808.
7 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 BFA SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 41643; 42561.

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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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