SAFEGUARDING
HEALTH
IN CONFLICT

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2023 Attacks on Health Care in War Zones Most Ever Documented

"Critical Condition: Violence Against Health Care in Conflict" finds more than 2,500 violent incidents against health care workers and facilities in conflict zones

GENEVA – In a **new report**, the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition identified 2562 incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care in conflicts in 2023, a 25% increase from 2022, representing *500 more* attacks than documented last year, and the highest ever since the **Coalition** began reporting. In its 11th annual report, *Critical Condition: Violence Against Health Care in Conflict*, the coalition documented arrests, kidnappings, and killings of health workers and damage to or destruction of health facilities in conflicts across 30 countries, or regions within countries, or territories.

There was intense violence against health care in new conflicts in Gaza and Sudan and continuing violence in Myanmar, Ukraine, and Haiti. Health facilities, transports, and patient access to care were also at high risk in the Sahel.

"Violence against health care reached appalling levels in 2023, said **Leonard Rubenstein, Chair of the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition (SHCC) comprising more than 40 nongovernmental organizations.** "Whether a product of recklessness, indifference, or intentional targeting, fighting forces' contempt for the law brought catastrophic harm to those in need of care and the health workers and systems intending to aid them. The world fails to ensure accountability for this violence at its peril."

Critical Condition reports the killing of more than 480 health workers, almost double the number reported in 2023. The toll included doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers, pharmacists, lab technicians, paramedics, and psychologists. The total is likely an undercount, as data collection on violence is impeded by insecurity, communication blockages, and the reluctance of entities to share the data on violence. You can download the **data** on the Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX) and explore the incidents visually on these interactive **global** and **Ukraine** maps.

The report details that both government forces and non-state armed groups bombed, occupied, raided, and vandalized health facilities throughout the year. Health facilities were increasingly occupied or repurposed for military use, in violation of humanitarian law. In the conflict in Gaza, Israel hit hospitals and ambulances by air and from the ground. In Sudan, health facilities suffered mortar shelling, missile attacks and bombing and were often

vandalized in the country's capital of Khartoum. Airstrikes on hospitals persisted in Myanmar and Syria. Russian forces entered and repurposed hospitals for military use in eastern Ukraine, and in Myanmar, armed forces similarly took over hospitals.

A rise in the use of explosive weapons– increasingly deployed via drones – affecting health facilities and health workers was reported in at least ten countries.

"The current use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and consequent harm to civilians that results from the destruction of the health system, is at alarmingly high levels. Transfers of weapons used to target health facilities remain unrestrained," said **Christina Wille, director of Insecurity Insight, a lead author of the report, whose organization led data collection and analysis.** "Destruction of the health system causes immediate and long-term harm not only to those injured by conflict but also expectant mothers, young children and the chronically ill, often with lifelong consequences."

Health workers were killed in 2023 in large numbers, especially in Gaza, where the 2023 total killed is the highest in any conflict documented by SHCC since **2016**. Russian forces killed military medics in Ukraine, many while providing care to wounded soldiers on the frontlines. In Israel, first responders and hospital staff were killed while administering aid to victims of the Hamas attacks of October 7.

Health workers were kidnapped, often for ransom, in conflicts across Africa, as well as a large number in Haiti. Health worker arrests increased in Afghanistan and the Occupied Palestinian Territory and continued at high levels in Myanmar. Arrests and long-term detentions of health workers persisted in Sudan and Syria.

In Sahel and elsewhere, rising insecurity limits health workers' ability to reach patients and access health care, which has devastating consequences for health outcomes.

"The hundreds of attacks on health care in just a year have meant catastrophe for the people of Sudan, as hospitals ceased to function and health workers had to flee," said **Dr. Yasir Elamin of the Sudanese American Physicians Association.** "Women and children are especially at risk. As long as the consequences of violence against health care are borne only by the victims, perpetrators will continue to disregard the law and attack health care workers and infrastructure."

The most severe impacts of these attacks involved the virtual collapse of health systems, as in Gaza, where most hospitals have been destroyed and closed, access to essential supplies blocked, and infrastructure damaged. This was also true in Sudan, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, and Tigray in Ethiopia. Attacks also created fear of seeking care in health facilities perceived to be unsafe. Looting and hijacking of vehicles and supplies resulted in impaired health services and erosion of health worker safety and morale, despite heroic efforts by them to repair facilities and overcome obstacles.

In addition to the chronically ill, who are deprived of care, and those directly injured by attacks, the report highlights those most affected by violence against health care: children and pregnant women. The report notes declines in the health monitoring of children under age five in the Democratic Republic of Congo and reports on how the Afghan Taliban's gender restrictions harm women's health. Children's hospitals were bombed in Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine. Health workers and providers engaged in vaccination campaigns were attacked on at least 24 occasions in 10 countries in 2023, leaving populations, especially children, vulnerable to infectious diseases.

Among the report's recommendations are:
- The International Criminal Court and national courts, through principles of universal jurisdiction, should, at long last, initiate prosecutions for war crimes and crimes against humanity involving attacks on the wounded and sick and on health facilities.
- Governments should cease arms transfers to parties to conflict that engage in grave breaches of international humanitarian law.
- Ministers of Health should engage with their own military and security forces and armed groups to protect health care from violence and strengthen mechanisms to mitigate the impacts of attacks on communities, health workers, and the health system.
- Regional bodies and the UN humanitarian cluster system should expand initiatives to protect health care in conflict and mitigate the impact of violence against it.

Methodology Note: The data in this report is compiled from open sources and partner-agency contributions of information, date, time, and location of incidents of violence and obstruction of health care in 2023 and is based on the WHO definition of attacks on health care. Due to this methodology, there are some differences between SHCC's numbers and other reports.

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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 and civil unrest. It has raised awareness of global attacks on health and pressed United Nations agencies for greater global action to protect the security of health care. The SHCC monitors attacks, strengthens universal norms of respect for the right to health, and demands accountability for perpetrators.