Statement by Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean

Cairo, Egypt, 11 January 2022 – The World Health Organization (WHO) is following with great concern the escalating crisis in Sudan, including 15 reported attacks on health care workers and health facilities since November 2021 in Khartoum and other cities, 11 of which have been confirmed.

Most of these attacks were committed against health care workers in the form of physical assault, obstruction, violent searches, and related psychological threats and intimidation. Also reported were 2 incidents involving raiding and military incursion of health care facilities. These actions can severely restrict patients' access to health care, which is especially problematic considering the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and other public health threats.

There have also been reports of arrest of patients and health care workers, as well as injury, detention and forced search of health personnel. These incidents resulted in the suspension of emergency services in some health facilities, as well as patients and medical personnel fleeing without completing medical treatment. WHO is also aware of the interception of ambulances, medical personnel and patients during their attempts to seek safety.

These targeted attacks on health care workers, patients and facilities are a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law and must stop now. Health care workers who have taken a professional oath to save the lives of others must be allowed to work without fear or concern for their personal well-being or that of their patients. Patients receiving medical care in health facilities must be able to receive treatment in a safe and secure setting.

WHO condemns all attacks against health care, regardless of motive or context. At a time when COVID-19 remains a significant threat, and people are also at risk of diseases such as dengue fever, malaria, measles and hepatitis E, it is imperative that health facilities and health care workers continue to function unimpeded.

WHO calls for an immediate cessation of all activities that endanger the lives of health care workers and patients or impede delivery of essential health services. WHO calls on the

Sudanese authorities to enforce implementation of Sudan's Law on the Protection of Doctors, Medical Staff and Health Establishments of 2020, and to comply with it within the framework of international humanitarian law.

The sanctity and safety of health care – including that of workers, patients, and facilities – must be respected and remain neutral, even within a highly politicized context.

Note to editors

The increasing number of incidents against health care in Sudan is of great concern, especially as the country documented a relatively low number of incidents in previous years (1 in 2020, 7 in 2019), even during social and political unrest situations in 2019.

In 2021, Sudan recorded 26 incidents of attacks on health care, with 4 deaths and 38 injuries of health care workers and patients. Most of the incidents were due to direct assaults on health care workers, which is an unusual pattern compared to other reporting countries.

WHO, in collaboration with the Sudanese Federal Ministry of Health and partners, has a crucial role to play in ensuring that hospitals and medical activities continue to operate under all circumstances, including delivering essential medicines to areas in need.

In 2019, WHO activated the surveillance and reporting system for attacks on health facilities and personnel in Sudan. Since then, WHO continues to train emergency control centres' staff and partners and provide technical support to ensure the protection of health institutions and personnel, in cooperation with the Federal Ministry of Health, partners and relevant actors.

WHO has trained dozens of doctors and medical staff in all states to deal with emergencies, first aid and community-based ambulatory services, especially in high-risk areas. WHO has also distributed, with the support of partners, several modern ambulances to transport critical and emergency cases under all circumstances.

Since the end of October 2021, WHO has distributed 856 rapid response kits containing essential medicines and medical supplies to Khartoum and several priority states, sufficient to

cover the needs of a population of 1.1 million people for 3 months.

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