

30 June 2019, Cairo, Egypt – The time has come to speak out once more about attacks on health care in WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Since the beginning of 2019, our Region has witnessed an average of more than one attack every day: hundreds of health workers have been killed, injured or assaulted, hospitals have been damaged and destroyed, and ambulances have been forced out of service.

Shockingly, many attacks have been due to deliberate targeting of health care by combatants; on other occasions, they result from indiscriminate or reckless use of force. In all circumstances, they reflect a disturbing disregard for the right to health and the sanctity of health care.

One of the most troubling aspects of these attacks is how widespread they are. In all of the conflicts in our Region, health care has been assaulted and disrupted by military aggression, cutting off health services to the most vulnerable.

In my visits to a number of countries in the Region, I met health professionals working under extremely challenging conditions. Some had experienced attacks on health care firsthand as the facilities they worked in were hit. In some cases, damage was so extensive that patients, including newborn babies in incubators, needed to be moved to safer areas. Others remembered friends and colleagues that had been tragically killed or injured as they worked to save the lives of others.

I met patients who had been forced to travel for many hours to seek life-saving care, because the hospitals closest to their homes had been damaged or destroyed. They told me of family members and friends who were unable to afford the cost of transport to the nearest functional health facility, and had no choice but to stay home and slowly die.

These stories of loss and survival moved me greatly, and strengthened my determination to continue speaking out against these horrific acts. In our Region, today more than ever, people who need access to life-saving health care should be able to access it, regardless of location or political affiliation. Health is a human right, yet attacks on health care contribute to depriving

millions of people of that basic right.

Until political solutions are found to resolve the ongoing conflict in many countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region, the safety of health care workers, patients, and facilities must be respected. Especially in crisis contexts, health care must remain neutral, and not be used for political motives or military purposes.

I pay full tribute to the humanitarian workers across our Region – and beyond – who risk their lives every day to help millions of people made vulnerable by conflict. I urge all parties to conflict to remember their obligations under international humanitarian law, and international human rights laws, to ensure the protection of health care. And I urge Member States and members of the international community to continuously hold all perpetrators to account.

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