Secretary-General's briefing to the Security Council Debate on Protection of Civilians: Healthcare in Armed Conflict [as delivered]

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I thank New Zealand for hosting today’s debate, and I welcome Mr. Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Dr. Joanne Liu, International President of Médecins Sans Frontières.

The ICRC and MSF play a critical role in providing healthcare in the most difficult and dangerous circumstances. I pay tribute to their staff, and all medical personnel under fire, for their dedication and professionalism.
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This morning, we awoke to reports of strikes on two more hospitals in Aleppo.

Let us be clear.  Those using ever more destructive weapons know exactly what they are doing.  They know they are committing war crimes.

Imagine the destruction.  People with limbs blown off.  Children in terrible pain with no relief.  Infected.  Suffering.  Dying, with nowhere to go and no end in sight.

Imagine a slaughterhouse.  This is worse.  Even a slaughterhouse is more humane.

Hospitals, clinics, ambulances and medical staff in Aleppo are under attack around the clock.

According to Physicians for Human Rights, 95 percent of medical personnel who were in Aleppo before the war have fled, been detained, or killed. This is a war against Syria’s health workers.

One medical professional spoke of how he endured the difficulty and the dangers.

 “This is Aleppo,” he said. “We don’t have time to be scared. We are being crushed like bugs daily, and the world has abandoned us.”

The global public does not distinguish between Member States, the Security Council, or the Secretary-General.

They only know one thing:  The world has let them down.  We have let them down.

There must be action.  There must be accountability.

International law is clear: medical workers, facilities and transport must be protected. The wounded and sick – civilians and fighters alike – must be spared. Deliberate attacks on hospitals are war crimes. Denying people access to essential health care violates international humanitarian law.

On 3 May, this Council adopted  resolution 2286 on the protection of medical care in armed conflict around the world.

Since May, there has been no let-up.

In Hajjah, Yemen, 19 people were killed last month in an attack on a hospital run by Médecins Sans Frontières. This forced the organization to evacuate its staff from six hospitals in the area, with untold consequences for sick and injured women, children and men.

In Pakistan, more than 70 people were killed in a suicide attack on Sandeman Provincial hospital on 8 August.

And in Syria, the carnage continues and no-one is spared.

The World Humanitarian Summit and the Agenda for Humanity reaffirmed that safeguarding humanity in armed conflict must be a priority. This Council has a unique responsibility and influence in this area.

Resolution 2286 urges parties to armed conflict and Member States to take concrete action.

The recommendations I have submitted to the Council provide  detailed steps to improve the protection of medical staff and facilities, as well as the wounded and sick.

First, prevention: Member States should do all they can to promote respect for medical care in armed conflict.

Align national legislation with international humanitarian law.

Establish dialogue between medical personnel, civil society organizations, and the authorities. Train all those involved in the laws and standards that apply.

And ensure that decisions on foreign policy, including those involving weapons sales and transfers, respect the provision of medical care in conflict.

Second, protection: Member States and parties to conflict must take precautions to safeguard medical facilities and personnel when they plan and conduct military operations.

My recommendations cover military orders, the location of targets, visible military presence in and around medical facilities, the issuing of advance warnings and evacuations, among other aspects.

Third, accountability. Member States and parties to conflict should ensure that those responsible for violations are prosecuted and punished.

They should also provide reparations and support to people and communities affected by such attacks.

This will mean conducting systematic and impartial investigations into specific incidents, and collecting and analyzing better and more extensive data.

Attacks and access restrictions on medical care are signs of a broader erosion of respect for international humanitarian law.

Failure to act is an affront to our shared humanity. It undermines States’ legal obligations and the multilateral system as a whole.

Building on pledges made at the World Humanitarian Summit, we need a global effort to enhance respect for the laws that safeguard humanity. This Council has a key role to play.

I call on you to take decisive steps so that protecting health care facilities and personnel during conflict moves from aspiration to reality.

More than this, I urge you to overcome your divisions and meet your responsibilities in Syria and around the world.

Thank you.