



RNAO Position Statement

The Right to Health and the Protection of Civilians and Health-care Workers in Conflict Zones

August 2025

The Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO) condemns ongoing systematic attacks on health workers, facilities, and civilians in conflict zones. We join the International Council of Nurses (ICN) (1) and other global health and human rights organizations (2–6) in calling on all governments, armed actors and international bodies to uphold the right to health and ensure the protection of health-care providers and infrastructure, as mandated by international humanitarian law.¹

In recent years the world has witnessed a disturbing increase in conflicts and wars, placing immense strain on health systems and exacerbating human suffering (10). Nurses have been at the forefront of these crises – responding to emergencies, supporting recovery efforts, and providing essential care to those affected by violence and displacement. These acts of care are not only vital but sacred – they must be protected at all costs.

Nurses demand protection and accountability

Nurses and other health professionals have been targeted through violence, imprisonment, torture, and even execution. Hospitals and clinics have been bombed. Patients and health workers have been killed and maimed. These are not isolated incidents – they are systematic violations of international humanitarian law and human rights. They are war crimes.

RNAO reaffirms the ethical duties of nurses to preserve life and ease suffering – duties that do not end in times of war. We strongly assert that:

- **Health care must never be a target.**
- **Medical personnel and facilities must be protected** under the Geneva Conventions and other instruments of international humanitarian law.
- **Patients must have unfettered access to care** without discrimination and with the least possible delay.
- **Medical confidentiality must be respected** even in conflict settings.
- **Health professionals must never be persecuted for adhering to ethical obligations**, including the treatment of all who need care, regardless of affiliation.

¹ For earlier RNAO statements on peace and conflict, see references 7–9.

- **Perpetrators of attacks on health care must be held accountable** through international legal mechanisms.
- **Mental health supports must be prioritized** for health-care workers and conflict-affected populations as part of a holistic health response.
- **Gender-based violence must be prevented and addressed**, including attacks against women, girls and gender-diverse people.
- **Third-party states, including Canada, must uphold their legal responsibilities** to prevent war crimes and protect the global right to health.
- **Solidarity with health workers in conflict zones** is essential. Their courage and professionalism must be recognized and supported.

Nurses demand protection of the right to health

The right to health is a universal human right – it does not disappear in wartime. Occupying powers and armed actors have legal obligations to safeguard the health of civilian populations, with particular attention to vulnerable groups. Yet we are witnessing widespread violations, including:

- **The destruction of life-sustaining systems** such as water, food, electricity and health infrastructure.
- **The targeting of civilian populations**, including arbitrary detention, hostage-taking and other forms of coercion.
- The widespread **bombing and shelling of residential areas**, resulting in mass civilian casualties and trauma.
- The **forced displacement** of population, often into overcrowded and unsafe areas without adequate shelter or services.
- **The imposition of siege** that blocks food, water, fuel, medicine and humanitarian aid.
- The deliberate use of **starvation as a tool of war**.
- The **collapse of environmental health and sanitation systems**, creating secondary public health emergencies.

These actions represent grave breaches of the right to health, the right to life, and international humanitarian law. When they are committed intentionally and systematically in the context of armed conflict, they constitute war crimes under the Geneva Conventions and customary international law (11). Such crimes demand urgent accountability from the international community, not only to uphold justice, but to deter further violations.

Nurses demand action now

RNAO calls on the Government of Canada and the international community to:

- **Cease all forms of direct and indirect support** – including military, economic, and diplomatic – to parties engaged in violations of international humanitarian law.
- **Stop exporting and transferring weapons and military technologies** to any actor credibly accused of committing war crimes, including attacks on civilians and health systems.
- **Enact and enforce targeted sanctions** on individuals, governments, and entities responsible for war crimes and other grave violations of international law.
- **Ensure full compliance with international humanitarian law** by all parties in armed conflicts.
- **Strengthen health systems in conflict-affected areas**, including infrastructure, staffing, and supply chains.
- **Protect vulnerable populations**, particularly women, children, refugees and the displaced.
- **Train military personnel, health professionals, and the public** on the laws and ethics protecting health care during times of conflict.
- **Support nurses and other health workers** through safety measures, mental health supports and international solidarity.

As nurses, we are appalled by the deliberate and widespread harm inflicted on civilian populations in conflict zones. We reaffirm the urgent necessity of upholding the right to health and ensuring the protection of health-care personnel and infrastructure under international law. We call on the Government of Canada to meet its legal and moral obligations by defending these principles unequivocally, and to take meaningful and decisive action to protect lives, health systems, and human dignity in all regions affected by conflict.

References

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