DECLARATION

Given the current humanitarian crisis in Syria where patients, healthcare workers, and hospitals are under attack, we the undersigned, without presumption of authority or judgment, stand in solidarity with our healthcare colleagues and declare their right to international health neutrality. For many decades, we have provided global healthcare professionals with education and training in humanitarian assistance in sudden onset disasters and conflicts worldwide. In this training and education, each and every healthcare provider, both civilian and military, is made aware of the inherent protections provided to them under international humanitarian law (IHL), including the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, as well as the principles and rules of IHL applicable to the conduct of hostilities, including the targeting of hospitals and medical facilities. These must be upheld.

These international laws are also clearly referenced in the Hague Statement on Respect for Humanitarian Principles (1991), UN Security Council Resolution 2286 on attacks against medical workers (2016) and military manuals of many States. As an example, the Russian Federation’s Military Manual (1990) states that attacks against medical personnel constitute a prohibited method of warfare. The Russian Federation’s Regulations on the Application of IHL (2001) states: “Persons protected by international humanitarian law include medical and religious personnel. Attacks against such persons are prohibited.”

As of June 2016, 757 healthcare personnel have been killed and 382 attacks have occurred on 269 separate medical facilities across Syria – 122 hospitals have been struck multiple times. All participants in the combat, as well as the Assad government and the Russian Federation, must recognize that all healthcare providers enjoy protection against direct attack themselves (see rules 25 to 30 of the ICRC’s customary IHL study, as well as protections in the Geneva Conventions and, where applicable, their Additional Protocols). IHL requires all Parties to both respect and to ensure respect for IHL, including under common Article 1 to the four Geneva Conventions. Failure to do so risks moral, ethical and legal consequences and penalties of their actions and inactions.

We join our healthcare professionals worldwide in condemning absolutely these deplorable actions in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and in many other countries, and demand their immediate cessation. We further advocate for the following remedies:

1. The establishment of healthcare safe zones in conflict regions to ensure the integrity of hospitals, clinics, and health centers.
2. Allow safe and unfettered passage of medical supplies, equipment, and personnel.
3. Cessation of all attacks on patients, pre-hospital personnel, and hospital medical staff.
4. Recognition by all parties of the neutrality of healthcare workers and their rights and responsibilities to care for any sick and injured patient, regardless of their nationality, race, religion, or political point of view.
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