

*Center for Public Health and Human Rights*

**Opportunities for WHO to Advance Protection of Health Functions in Armed Conflict**

Despite firm standards rooted in the Geneva Conventions to protect health facilities, health workers, and the patients they serve during armed conflict, and to enable health professionals to act consistently with their ethical obligations, assaults on and interference with health functions are all too common in war. Aside from the human toll they take, these attacks often compromise the ability to deliver care to populations in great need, impede efforts to reconstruct health systems after war, and lead to the flight of health workers whose presence in a time of great social stress is essential.

Despite the seriousness of the problem, the international community has taken few steps to provide guidance to promote compliance with the law, nor even to assess and report on violations in a uniform and comprehensive manner. Sound methodologies for data collection about these assaults have not been developed. The lack of systematic reporting and documentation of these violations contributes to continued disregard for an established and internationally recognized legal framework of protection. Mechanisms to encourage compliance with these international norms are needed as a first step in preserving critical health services in conflict settings.<sup>1</sup>

WHO can play a key role in filling this gap. Key elements of its mission include developing sound methods to collect data on health, establishing mechanisms for data collection, and providing policy guidance on major global health challenges. WHO has the authority to design and implement uniform standards and methods of data collection on attacks on medical functions, personnel and patients; it can also assure compilation and distribution of that information and contribute to policy that would enhance protection. There is some precedent as well through the safe hospitals initiative.

A resolution from the World Health Assembly could advance this role for WHO. To begin consideration of the process, leading states in the WHA can sponsor a discussion at the WHA's meeting in May, 2011 to explore a resolution that would:

- Establish a working group consisting of WHO staff and external experts with technical and subject matter expertise on appropriate methodologies for collecting data on assaults on medical functions in armed conflict and the means for its collection, including the security of data and the individuals and agencies collecting it.
- Commit WHO to follow through on the analysis and recommendations of the working group to develop and disseminate methodologies for collecting data on assaults on health functions in armed conflict.
- Establish as a WHO function the development and implementation of a plan to assure collection of such data.
- Provide a basis for WHO development and issuance of policy guidance to member states on strategies for enhancing protection. .

Following such a discussion, broader consultations would begin with member states, civil society groups, and the International Committee of the Red Cross toward a goal of a WHA resolution on the subject in 2012.

1. Rubenstein, L and Bittle, M. Responsibility for Protection of Medical Workers and Facilities in Armed Conflict. *Lancet* 2010; 375: 329-40.