



Position Statement

Armed conflict: nursing's perspective

ICN Position:

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) strongly opposes armed conflict and believes negotiation, mediation, and other peaceful conflict resolution and diplomatic solutions should be sought to avoid it. ICN's particular concern focuses on the potential impact armed conflict has for affected civilians, refugees and internally displaced persons and combatants including direct and indirect impact on health and development and violation of basic human rights.

Women, children and older persons living in conflict zones are especially vulnerable, and require access to appropriate care, counselling and personal security to assist them in maintaining or rebuilding sound physical and emotional health. ICN condemns the growing number of children serving as soldiers in armed conflict and the deployment of child soldiers regardless of any claims of volunteerism on the part of the children. This is a form of modern day slavery and a violation of the child's basic human rights.

ICN believes nurses have an important role to play in addressing the impact of armed conflict on the emergency and long term health needs of refugees and internally displaced persons, other civilian populations and wounded combatants, and demands protection for all health facilities and health professionals providing care and relief personnel in conflict zones. Deliberate attacks on health care facilities and personnel and on patients and medical vehicles is a violation of international law¹.

In cases of armed conflict ICN urges national nurses associations (NNAs) to:

- Call upon their governments to respect international law and ensure the immediate provision of humanitarian assistance, including health care, to refugees and displaced persons and to facilitate open and co-ordinated access of international humanitarian organisations in the affected regions.
- Examine the implications for their countries and undertake co-operative action with local branches of government, UN agencies and non-governmental organisations at national and local levels to provide adequate health services for all those in need without discrimination.
- Call upon their governments to ensure the duty to care of nurses and other health workers are not obstructed for political reasons.
- Safeguard non-discriminatory access to health care for wounded combatants and prisoners of war.
- Promote the systems required for the public reporting of massacres of civilians and other serious human rights violations, the accurate and timely investigation of these reports, and the deployment of human rights monitors when necessary.
- Support the establishment and functioning of national institutions to protect and promote human rights.
- Lobby for demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration of all combatants, including child soldiers into safe and healthy environments.

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Background

About 90 percent of the victims of armed conflicts between and within states are civilians. Currently there are over 10.5 million refugees and over 27.5 million internally displaced persons throughout the world. There are also over 300,000 child soldiers around the world. Adequate health care and protection of human rights for civilians in conflict zones, for refugees and for displaced persons is required.

ICN endorses the *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949*, as the basis for international humanitarian law and the principle instruments for the defence of human dignity in war time, and calls for the application of these in all armed conflicts.

References:

- United Nations High Commission for Refugees, Annual Report 2010.
International Committee of the Red Cross, *Rights and Duties of Nurses and civilian medical personnel under the Geneva Convention of August 12, 1949*, Geneva ICRC, 1970
United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations, Adopted 10 December 1948*.

Adopted in 1999

Reviewed and revised in 2007 and 2012

Related ICN Positions:

- Nurses and Human Rights
- Rights of Children
- Health services for migrants, refugees and displaced persons
- Nurses' role in the care of prisoners and detainees
- Towards elimination of weapons of war and conflict

The International Council of Nurses is a federation of more than 130 national nurses associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality nursing care for all and sound health policies globally.

ⁱ. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) 2011. *Health care in danger: A harsh reality*. Geneva: author.