

The Guardian: Doctors Warn that Syria's Healthcare System is at 'Breaking Point'

Reported by: Dr. Abdo Jurjus

*Professor Department of Anatomy, Cell Biology & Physiology
Faculty of Medicine - American University of Beirut
Lebanese Health Society*

Open letter says Syria is suffering because of attacks on hospitals and 15,000 doctors have fled the country. Group of 55 doctors and medical professionals, including three Nobel Prize winners, will warn this week that Syria's healthcare system is "at breaking point" because of attacks on hospitals, staff being attacked, imprisoned or fleeing the country, and humanitarian organisations being denied access to patients.

In an open letter to the Lancet, they say that large parts of Syria are completely cut off from any form of medical assistance. The signatories, who span five continents, cite figures suggesting 469 health workers are currently imprisoned and about 15,000 doctors have fled the country. In Syria's largest city, Aleppo, there are just 36 physicians, compared to 5,000 before the civil war began, they say.

"We are appalled by the lack of access to healthcare for affected civilians, and by the deliberate targeting of medical facilities and personnel," the letter says. "It is our professional, ethical, and moral duty to provide treatment and care to anyone in need. When we cannot do so personally, we are obliged to speak out in support of those risking their lives to provide life-saving assistance."

The signatories, although from countries with widely differing views on responsibility for the crisis in Syria, including Russia, China, Brazil, US, and the UK, argue together that the current focus on military intervention, in the wake of the chemical weapons attack in the Damascus suburbs last month, should not detract from the need to help the victims of the conflict.

According to the World Health Organisation, 37% of Syrian hospitals have been destroyed and a further 20% severely damaged.

The signatories say women are giving birth with no medical assistance, life-saving surgery is being carried out without anaesthetic, children are not being vaccinated and victims of sexual violence have nowhere to turn to. Horrific injuries are going untended while people with chronic illnesses, including cancer, are not receiving any care, according to the letter.

There has already been a measles epidemic sweeping through some districts of northern Syria, an alarming increase in cases of acute diarrhoea and an outbreak of cutaneous leishmaniasis, a severe infectious skin disease that can cause serious disability.

"To alleviate the effect on civilians of this conflict and of the deliberate attacks on the healthcare system, and to support our medical colleagues, we call on the Syrian government and all armed parties to refrain from attacking hospitals, ambulances, medical facilities and supplies, health professionals and patients," the signatories say. They demand access to treatment for patients and for perpetrators of attacks to be held accountable. The letter says governments supporting the opposing sides in the civil war should use their influence to stop the attacks and the UN and international donors must do more to increase support to Syrian medical networks.

Signatories include the 2008 and 2011 winners of the Nobel Prize in Medicine, Dr Harald zur Hausen, from Germany, and Jules Hoffmann from France, and the former director-general of the World Health Organisation, Gro Harlem Brundtland.

While a deal struck on Saturday to disarm President Bashar al-Assad's regime of its chemical weapons has, for now, averted the prospect of western military intervention, which some humanitarian groups have warned would make the situation worse, there was no sign on Sunday that it will help bring about a resolution to the two-and-a-half-year conflict that has claimed the lives of more than 100,000 people.

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