

## A statement on the war in Syria from SIAARTI and partners

In Syria, never-ending bombing currently involves not only military, but also civilian targets. Several hospitals have been hit; some are completely destroyed.

Syria remains at the forefront of global media with images of bombings and other atrocities reported in newspapers and on television on an almost daily basis. It is clear that the war is not only impacting military combatants, but is having an immeasurable impact on the civilian population.

The media informs us that among the injured or dead civilians are hundreds of children. A Correspondence published in *The Lancet* by Zulfiqar A Bhutta and colleagues (Sept 24, p 1275)<sup>1</sup> emphasised findings from a recent UN Secretary General's report,<sup>2</sup> arguing that the report "paints a bleak picture of systematic abuse and violation of every existing regulation for the protection and safeguarding of children and families across a wide range of countries that are experiencing acute and longstanding conflict".<sup>1</sup>

To add to this already dire situation, many hospitals across the country have been hit and are now semi-functional or destroyed. Medical staff in hospitals across Syria put themselves in extreme danger by going to work each and every day, despite the great personal risk involved. This is a poignant reminder of the dedication of medical staff, but also a reminder that they are often directly targeted by those seeking to cause further destruction and destabilisation within the country.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of World War 2, 196 countries acknowledged the principle that civilians should not be used as military targets. The Geneva Conventions officially declared this principle in 1949,<sup>4</sup> limiting the

indiscriminate violence of war. Yet many actions reported in Syria suggest these conventions have been violated. In response to the September 2016 attacks on hospitals in Aleppo, the UN Secretary General himself said "Let us be clear. Those using ever more destructive weapons know exactly what they are doing. They know they are committing war crimes.... Deliberate attacks on hospitals are war crimes. Denying people access to essential health care violates international humanitarian law".<sup>5</sup>

What can and should be done? The scale of destruction in Syria demands that the medical community speak out. As anaesthesiologists, we condemn the killing of civilians, children and health professionals. We further condemn those who may have acted in such a way that violates the Geneva Conventions and demand that all governments abide by international humanitarian law in order to stop these actions from continuing and to ensure that those responsible are held accountable for their actions.

The Italian Society of Anesthesia, Analgesia, Reanimation and Intensive Care (SIAARTI) is calling on other anaesthesia societies to take action, and has made this statement jointly with many international scientific and medical societies (appendix).

Like the International Pediatric Association,<sup>1</sup> anaesthesiology, intensive care and pain medicine societies around the world must be clear on their stance on atrocities committed in Syria. Whether releasing an official statement of condemnation on their website or in scientific journals, discussing the situation within councils, or sharing their condemnation with the wider public via social media, we call upon them to speak up in support of the people of Syria, as well as those colleagues tirelessly working in medical facilities in the face of danger and adversity.

We, as anaesthesiologists and concerned global citizens, are ready to speak out against atrocities in Syria:

every single voice will strengthen this humanitarian message.

This letter is an initiative of SIAARTI, and is endorsed by Gonzalo Barreiro (President of the World Federation of Societies of Anaesthesiologists [WFSA]), Zeev Goldik (President of the European Society of Anaesthesiology [ESA]), Jannicke Mellin-Olsen (Secretary of the ESA and President-Elect of the WFSA) and many national and international societies (see appendix for a full list of societies). AC is the President of SIAARTI. FP is the President-Elect of SIAARTI and an ESA National Anaesthesiologists Societies Committee (NASC) delegate. EDR is Treasurer of the European Board of Anaesthesiology (EBA) section of the European Union Medical Specialities (UEMS). We declare no competing interests.

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- 1 Bhutta ZA, Keenan WJ, Bennett S. Children of war: urgent action is needed to save a generation. *Lancet* 2016; **388**: 1275–76.
- 2 Report of the UN Secretary General. Children and armed conflict. UN General Assembly Security Council seventieth session, agenda item 68. April 20, 2016. [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2016\\_360.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2016_360.pdf) (accessed Dec 2, 2016).
- 3 Heisler M. Attacks on Health Care in Syria — Normalizing Violations of Medical Neutrality? *N Engl J Med* 2015; **373**: 2489–91.
- 4 International Committee of the Red Cross. The Geneva Conventions and Commentaries. <https://www.icrc.org/en/war-and-law/treaties-customary-law/geneva-conventions> (accessed Dec 5, 2016).
- 5 UN Press Release. After strikes on Syrian hospitals, Secretary-General says "Even slaughterhouse is more humane", urging action as Security Council debates health care in conflict. SG/SM/18159-SC/12537. Sept 28, 2016. <http://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sgsm18159.doc.htm> (accessed Dec 5, 2016).



Published Online  
December 19, 2016  
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)32593-4](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)32593-4)

See Online for appendix