Respect for International Humanitarian Law: the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel and Medical Workers in Armed Conflict
Today, the Delegation of the European Union to the UN Geneva handed over the Chairmanship of the Humanitarian Liaison Working Group (HLWG) to Germany, hosting its last meeting after two years as Chair.

The topic of the last HLWG meeting under EU Chairmanship was dedicated to the "Respect for International Humanitarian Law: the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel and Medical Workers in Armed Conflict".

"The objective of this meeting is to address and raise awareness on the importance of the protection of humanitarian personnel and medical workers in situations of armed conflicts", said EU Ambassador Stevens. He queried what the International Community could do more to increase the respect for International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and better ensure the protection of humanitarian personnel and medical workers in armed conflict.

The HLWG meeting was organised in the continuity of the side event on IHL at UNGA in September 2018 co-organised with Belgium and OCHA and a demonstration of the EU's continued support of activities and initiatives to raise awareness and support for the respect of IHL. Some 80% of global humanitarian assistance addresses the consequences of armed conflicts. Given the frequency of attacks on medical personnel and patients in conflict-affected countries, it is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed and acted on. In 2017, the World Health Organization (WHO) recorded 322 attacks across conflict-affected countries, resulting in 242 deaths and 229 injuries among medical personnel and patients.

Keynote speaker Dr. Hanna Kaade, Medical Doctor and Former Public Health Officer in Aleppo, shared his experiences from the field and drew a bleak picture on the realities and challenges medical workers in Syria are experiencing in providing life-saving, first-aid and other medical services. Some 814 medical workers have been killed between the years 2011 and 2017, and about 50% of the country's medical staff has left Syria.

Mr. Jean Louis De Brouwer, Director for Europe, Eastern Neighbourhood and Middle East at the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) spoke on the role of the EU as a global humanitarian actor. Indeed, the EU is a leading humanitarian policy maker and donor promoting respect for IHL and in particular the protection of humanitarian personnel and medical workers. New challenges imposed by the changing nature of conflicts mean a collective responsibility by the international community to protect and provide safety for them. He also drew attention to the impact of counter-terrorist legislation on the work of humanitarian/medical workers and the humanitarian space wherein one operates.

Deputy Director of Operations of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Ms. Mary Werntz, highlighted the work of ICRC in relation to compliance with IHL, in particular about the protection of medical staff and infrastructure, and referred to field initiatives like the "Health Care in Danger" Initiative. She stressed the importance of involving the healthcare community and affected persons in the process of finding effective solutions. Mentioning the need for strong evidence, she highlighted the relevance to collect more data on violent attacks against healthcare workers, something that she recommended to be included in national research agendas. Following Boko Haram's execution of another aid worker in Nigeria only a few days ago, she called on States to act now and do everything to prevent these IHL violations.

Mr. Rudi Coninx, Chief of Humanitarian Policy and Guidance of the World Health Organization (WHO) stressed the ongoing importance of Resolution 2286 of the UN Security Council from 3 May 2016 on the protection of health care in armed conflict—including medical workers, transport, equipment and...
facilities which strongly condemns acts of violence against medical and humanitarian personnel exclusively engaged in in medical duties. He underlined that States have the responsibility to make sure Resolution 2286 is implemented. He underlined the importance of de-confliction and advocated for more data collection on attacks on health care workers and infrastructure to document these incidents so that action can be taken and perpetrators held accountable.

Mr Ezequiel Heffes, senior legal advisor of Geneva Call informed about the efforts of Geneva Call, dedicated to promoting respect by armed non-State actors (ANSAs) for international humanitarian norms in armed conflict and other situations of violence, in particular those related to the protection of civilians. Geneva Call is currently developing a "deed of commitment" for the protection of healthcare personnel.

Mr. Raphael Gorgeu, Deputy Director of Operations of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) stressed how attacks on healthcare providers and humanitarian staff directly impact the health and safety of local civilian populations. Regarding the growing number of attacks on humanitarian and medical personnel, he highlighted the need of ensuring the accountability of those carrying out attacks against IHL.

In the ensuing debate, discussions circled around the worrying developments of growing numbers of attacks on aid workers, medical staff and facilities as well as on the idea that to make a difference, efforts must be joined to collect more data and evidence-based analysis and reporting, engage in joint-up outreach, awareness raising and advocacy, but also discrete diplomacy, as well as work on enhancing accountability.

As keynote speaker, Mr. Kaade closed the session by calling for continued support and pool available capacities to help health workers and humanitarian personnel implement the aim of humanitarian work: assisting people in need.

EU Ambassador Stevens handed over the Chairmanship of the HLWG to Ambassador von Ungern-Sternberg of Germany, the incoming Chair. Reflecting on the past two years of EU Chairmanship of the HLWG, Ambassador Stevens said: "We have touched upon many different topics, including the most pressing issues of our time. Above all, we addressed new challenges and continued to deepen our expertise on field-related themes."

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