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PRESS RELEASE

Protecting humanitarian and health workers during armed conflicts

A shared responsibility

Ottawa, September 17th, 2024 – As part of a panel organized by Doctors of the World Canada, Olivier Vandecasteele, Belgian humanitarian worker and founder of [Protect Humanitarians](#), spoke today at the Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa. The objective of the conference was to advance the commitments of the Canadian humanitarian sector in strengthening the protection of humanitarian and health workers who provide care and support to local populations during armed conflicts. In collaboration with the Belgian Embassy and other Canadian humanitarian organizations and coalitions, the panel called attention to the shared responsibilities of States and NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) in improving these protection measures.

Attacks against humanitarian workers are increasing

In 2024, as armed conflicts multiply and intensify, 299.4 million people worldwide are in need of humanitarian aid. To bring vital aid to these populations that are severely affected by conflicts, humanitarian and health personnel must work in increasingly dangerous environments. In 2023, according to the *Aid Worker Security Report*, it is estimated that **595 humanitarian workers across the world were victims of attacks and violence, of whom 280 were killed, 224 injured, and 91 kidnapped. A grim record, as this number of humanitarian workers killed by violence is the highest ever recorded.**

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and humanitarian principles form the basis for the protection of humanitarian actions and medical missions. And yet, despite these protections, the challenges to guaranteeing the safety of humanitarians and health professionals working within armed conflicts are growing.

Worldwide, we are witnessing not only an escalation, but also a normalization of the violence that targets humanitarians.

“The situation is critical and compromises our ability to intervene at a time when the needs are greater than ever. We need a concerted approach from all players. States, including Canada, as well as the international community, must also share the responsibilities. Let's work together to lighten the burden of risk for first responders; this is a priority”, stated Nadja Pollaert, Executive Director of Doctors of the World Canada.

In 2023, Doctors of the World, Humanity & Inclusion, and Action Against Hunger published a report entitled [*"The risks we face are beyond human comprehension: Advancing the protection of humanitarian and health workers"*](#). This report highlights the main challenges and demands that organizations face in order to ensure the safety of humanitarian and health personnel.

A call for concrete actions and shared responsibility

We call on the parties to the conflicts, but also on States, to take concrete actions to **protect humanitarian and health workers from all forms of violence, in particular by condemning these violations and by fighting against their impunity.**

The humanitarian system relies on **local personnel, who account for 95% of the victims**, as they work on the front lines where needs are the greatest. Yet at this moment, these workers are the least protected, equipped and supported. **We call on States and international NGOs to share resources and prioritize support for local organizations, so that they may manage their own security.**

To ensure the safety of their personnel, organizations must put strategies in place that both prevent and respond to risks. This means, for example, obtaining equipment, training their staff, or assigning people to safety management. **We call on aid funders to systematically finance the costs linked to the security management and support of the humanitarians who are targets and victims.**

“Without protection for humanitarian personnel, there can be no effective humanitarian aid for civilian populations, who are the first victims of conflicts. We call on States to address the virtually complete impunity of perpetrators of attacks, and to increase legal assistance to survivors and families of victims, so that perpetrators are progressively brought to justice. We ask donors and NGO leaders to invest in mental health support for humanitarian workers, as they are increasingly confronted with traumatic events. Initiatives like Protect Humanitarians aim to give a voice to local humanitarians in global advocacy efforts for the protection of humanitarian aid workers”, explained Olivier Vandecasteele, humanitarian and founder of [*Protect Humanitarians*](#).

Beyond the toll paid by humanitarian and health workers, this intensification of violence also has a **considerable impact on the civilian populations** who are trapped by these conflicts. Not only are they the victims of increasingly longer conflicts and more complex emergency situations, they are also sometimes deliberately deprived of vital humanitarian assistance and protection.

Humanitarian and health workers must be better protected, as quickly as possible, so that vital needs and care may continue to be provided to the civilian populations affected by these armed conflicts.

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