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Nurses are at greater risk than ever as they tackle the pandemic, natural disasters, conflicts and political upheaval

Geneva, Switzerland, 2 September 2021 – Nurses all over the world are facing dangers as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, but those in fragile states, which have endured natural disasters and complicated political situations, are at more risk than ever before.

Access to healthcare is a fundamental human right and nurses have a duty to deliver care to those who need it, irrespective of their position in society, without fear or favour.

But the International Council of Nurses (ICN) is aware that in many countries, nurses are vulnerable to attack whenever nations have unstable governments, or there is conflict, social upheaval or natural disasters.

ICN President Annette Kennedy said:

“The COVID-19 pandemic has opened the eyes of the world to the importance of nurses to societies everywhere. But it has also exposed nurses to additional dangers. In various hotspots around the world, we are seeing the terrible burdens that conflict, natural disasters and civil unrest have loaded on to nurses’ backs. At its worst, the targeting of nurses, 90% of whom are female, is being used as a weapon of war.

‘Nurses are resilient, but they should not be expected to carry every load they are given, and they should certainly not be targeted for abuse and even violence simply because they are doing their jobs. The world needs nurses more than ever, but it is treating them poorly, and that situation will lead to serious problems in the future, because nurses are not invincible. Our nurses, your nurses, need to be taken care of so that they can keep returning to work every day and do their unique work of helping to keep patients and families safe and well.’”



United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, who has spoken about credible reports of serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights abuses in Afghanistan will be speaking at the ICN Congress on the topic of ‘Gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls’. See below for more details.

ICN Chief Executive Officer Howard Catton said:

“As we have witnessed all too often, whenever the norms of society break down, nurses are vulnerable. We have seen this during the COVID-19 pandemic, where nurses providing care or vaccinations have been attacked by people in their communities. And we have seen it in conflict zones, where they are targeted by one side or the other for providing care for everyone. We know of nurses who have had to set up impromptu field hospitals because it is the only way they can provide care to certain communities, a situation that would be completely unnecessary if warring factions and governments fulfilled their duties of care to their citizens under the Geneva Conventions.

‘In the past two years, the eyes of the world have been on nursing. But media attention on terrible humanitarian situations is fleeting, and the focus of the news moves quickly on to the next flashpoint. It is important to remember that when the camera crews have left, nurses are still there, holding their societies together by caring for the sick and injured. They need to be protected, and they must not be forgotten.’

ICN’s [Position Statement on Nurses and Human Rights](#) endorses United Nations declarations on human rights and acknowledges the obligation on all nurses to safeguard, respect and actively promote people’s health rights at all times and in all places. By the same token, ICN expects governments to protect the human rights of nurses so that they can fulfil their duty to the people who rely on them for healthcare.

On 24 August, Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, addressed the Human Rights Council stating that the UNHCR has received “credible reports of serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights abuses” in Afghanistan, including restrictions to the rights of women

Mr Catton commented, “We see that Afghanistan is at watershed moment. The country has massive health needs and the nurses and healthcare workers who remain need practical support, supplies, funding and protection of their rights. The international community must now work to prevent a humanitarian crisis.”

At the ICN virtual Congress, 2-4 November, Michelle Bachelet will speak in a plenary session on the topic of “Gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls”. The first female president of Chile (2006-2010 and 2014-2018), Ms Bachelet also served as the first Director of UN Women, an organization dedicated to fighting for the rights of women and girls internationally. She has recently pledged to be a Gender Champion, committing to advance gender equality in OHCHR and in international fora. The plenary session, which will be held on 3 November, will also include Mariam Jalabi, the United Nations representative of the Syrian opposition Coalition and co-founder of the Syrian Women’s Political Movement, and Dr Roopa Dhatt, Executive Director of Women in Global Health, a global movement with the largest network of women and allies working to challenge power and privilege for gender equity in health. To hear these speakers, and many other high-profile experts and celebrities from the world of television, music and sports, register for the ICN Congress now!

Note for Editors

The **International Council of Nurses** (ICN) 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 care for all and sound health policies globally.

For more information please contact Gyorgy Madarasz, Press Officer at madarasz@icn.ch

Tel: +41 22 908 01 16

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