



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing**

### ***Briefing Series on Syria***

### **Five Years of War in Syria: Health Care Under Attack**

**Thursday, March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016**

**1:00 – 2:00 PM**

**2261 Rayburn House Office Building**

#### **Opening Remarks**

Good afternoon. On behalf of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, I welcome you to the second in our series of briefings on Syria, which we have organized to mark the fifth anniversary of the 2011 pro-democracy protests whose violent suppression led to a full-scale armed conflict – to date, the deadliest conflict of the twenty-first century. I would like to extend a special welcome to our panelists, two of whom have traveled down from New York to join us today. Thanks to all of you for the work you do on behalf of the Syrian people.

The Commission is certainly not alone in recognizing the anniversary of the protests, nor the significance of the ongoing conflict. We are one of many voices that have consistently sought to draw attention to the way the war has been waged and its consequences for the Syrian people.

The Commission convened its first hearing on human rights violations in Syria back in July of 2011 and another in March of 2012, and we have issued a number of statements over the years condemning actions by the Assad regime that have brutalized and terrorized the Syrian people. This past February, we held a briefing on the question of accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity that have been committed both in Syria and in Iraq, and two weeks ago we looked at the humanitarian and refugee crisis that has been generated by the Syrian conflict. Today we will hear specifically about the impact of the conflict on medical personnel and infrastructure, and the consequences for Syrians of the destruction of the capacity to provide medical services.

I recount this history not to congratulate the Commission for its prescience, but as a small reminder that some of us in the Congress have understood from the beginning that the Syrian conflict was directed principally against the civilian population. Estimates of the numbers

of civilians killed vary widely because the situation on the ground is so volatile and dangerous that reports of casualties cannot be verified.

But whatever the precise number of victims, what is absolutely clear is that the war has been prosecuted with total disregard for human rights and international humanitarian law. The Assad regime has used chemical weapons and barrel bombs against its own people; it has laid siege to cities and towns, inflicting starvations on the civilian inhabitants; and as we will hear today, it bears the greatest share of the responsibility for the systematic destruction of medical facilities and for killing doctors, nurses and first responders.

What I want to emphasize this afternoon is that these tactics, this strategy of targeting the civilian population, is illegal under international humanitarian law. Specifically in regard to medical services, the Geneva Conventions provide that medical facilities and personnel are to be protected, respected, and may not be the object of attack during armed conflict. Indiscriminate or targeted attacks on hospitals, medical units, and medical personnel functioning in a humanitarian capacity are never admissible. Yet as we will hear, hundreds of attacks have been documented and hundreds of medical personnel have been killed. We are not talking here about collateral damage; the Syrian conflict is characterized by purposeful non-compliance with the obligations created by the international community to protect civilians.

Syria is not the only place where these attacks are happening. Afghanistan, South Sudan, Israel, Palestine, Somalia and other conflict zones have all seen their share of attacks on health workers and medical centers, and scores of medical facilities have been destroyed in the war that began in March of last year in Yemen. The perpetrators of these attacks include government security forces as well as rebel, insurgent and terrorist groups.

The attacks have grown so numerous and alarming that discussions have begun in the UN Security Council on a draft resolution that would reiterate the need for combatants to observe the obligation not to attack health care facilities. But at the same time, as a recent *Foreign Policy* article pointed out, at least three of the five major powers on the UN Security Council – Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom -- have either been involved in attacks on medical facilities themselves or are supporting armed forces, like the Saudi-led air coalition in Yemen, that have hit medical facilities. I share the concern that any involvement by governments in such attacks risks sending a signal that striking out at medical facilities is not beyond the pale.

So today I look forward to hearing recommendations for actions the Congress could take both to improve the humanitarian situation on the ground in Syria by protecting doctors and hospitals, and to restore respect for and compliance with international humanitarian law. Thank you again for your presence, and I turn the microphone over to the panelists.