

# Managing emergencies in obstetrics in countries where there is armed conflict: public health and political issues.

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## Declaration of interest

I do not have an affiliation (financial or otherwise) with pharmaceutical, medical device, defense industries, or communications organisations.

**Geneva Academy. Academy of international humanitarian law and human rights 2025**  
**114 armed conflicts involving 38 countries (most non-international, some military occupations)**

Region	Number	Countries affected
Middle East and North Africa	45	Cyprus, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Yemen and Western Sahara.
Africa	35	Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan.
Asia	21	Afghanistan, China, India, Myanmar, Pakistan and The Philippines.
Europe	7	Russia is currently occupying Crimea (Ukraine), Transdniestria (Moldova), as well as South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Georgia). Armenia is occupying parts of Nagorno Karabakh (Azerbaijan). International conflict when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022
Latin America	6	Mexico and Columbia (drug related)
Totals	114	Involves 38 countries

## The Rome Statute (July 1998) grants the International Criminal Court jurisdiction over 4 main crimes against humanity

1) the crime of **genocide** characterised by a specific intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group by killing its members or by other means causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; or forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

**Current examples:** Gaza and Ukraine

2) **crimes against humanity**, serious violations committed as part of a large-scale attack against any civilian population. The 15 crimes include offences of murder, rape, imprisonment, enforced disappearances, enslavement – particularly of women and children, sexual slavery, torture, apartheid and deportation.

3) grave **breaches of the Geneva conventions** in the context of armed conflict including, for example, the use of child soldiers, the killing or torture of persons such as civilians or prisoners of war, intentionally directing attacks against hospitals, historic monuments, or buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science or charitable purposes.

4) **the crime of aggression** defined as the use of armed force by one State against the sovereignty, integrity, or independence of another State. **Current example:** Russia invading Ukraine

# **Health consequences of conflict for pregnant women**

Death and permanent injuries: physical, sexual and psychological

Malnutrition leading to Intra Uterine Fetal Deaths (IUFDs), ante and post partum sepsis, and failures of breast feeding

Lack of immunization

Water and sanitation destruction and the spread of gastrointestinal infections such as cholera

Deaths and absence of partners and family members during pregnancy and delivery

Absence of pain control, including anaesthesia, during labour and delivery

## Vulnerability of women and girls

### **Rape widely used as a weapon of war**

Women and girls are vulnerable to sexual violence, trafficking, and mutilation, whether at home, in flight, or in camps for displaced populations

The trauma for female victims of sexual violence may continue even when the conflict is over, as they are frequently shunned, ostracized and further stigmatized

## Vulnerability of women and girls

Less able to protect themselves from violence

Possibility of pregnancy that may result in miscarriage and heavy blood loss which, in the absence of blood transfusion or basic surgery, can be life threatening.

High prevalence of septic unintended pregnancies following self-managed or non-professional attempts to end the pregnancy

Risk of serious infections, such as HIV and hepatitis

Complications of later pregnancy such as pelvic immaturity (especially in adolescent girls), placenta praevia and accreta, rupture of scars following earlier CS, IUFD where no antibiotics or safe ability to deliver the stillborn baby, severe preeclampsia and no  $\text{MgSO}_4$ , antihypertensive drugs or safe induction available.



# UNOCHA: The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in 2011

*“Grave violations of international humanitarian and human rights law and blatant disrespect for the normative framework of humanity that has emerged over the past 50 years is common to many conflicts.*

*Civilians have become the primary target of attack motivated by ethnic or religious hatred, political confrontation, or simply ruthless pursuit of economic interests”*



# Objectives of Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition

<https://www.safeguardinghealth.org/about-coalition>

**In 2016 after documenting attacks on healthcare in 23 countries**

1. Prevent bombing, shelling, and looting of hospitals and clinics
2. Protection of supplies of essential drugs and medical supplies
3. Protection of supplies of food and clean water
4. Protection of vulnerable persons (pregnant women, babies, children, injured and ill)
5. Prevent killing of health workers, emergency medical personnel, and patients
6. Protection of incoming humanitarian workers
7. Prevent intimidation, assault, arrest, and abduction of health workers and patients
8. Prevent obstruction of access to care including blockage of and attacks on ambulances
9. Prevent takeover and occupation of health facilities by police, military, or other armed persons
10. Provide safe and urgent medical evacuation for patients who cannot be treated in country (for example now in Gaza which has been rendered uninhabitable)



## Potential UN Peacekeeping Mandates

1. Deployment to prevent the outbreak of a conflict or the spill-over of conflict across borders
2. Stabilizing of conflict situations after a ceasefire, to create an environment for the parties to reach a lasting peace agreement
3. Leading states or territories through a transition to stable government, based on democratic principles, good governance, and economic development.

**The UN Security Council can also mandate important tasks relating to the protection of women and children:**

**1. UN Resolution on women, peace and security S/RES/1325 (2005)**

*First ever resolution on security and peace*

Called for prosecution of crimes against women, for **increased protection of women and girls during war**, and for more women to participate in decision-making in conflict resolution and peace processes

**2. UN Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) on children and armed conflict.**

**3. UN Security Council resolution 1674 (2006) on the protection of civilians in armed conflict.**

# **The UN Security Council is currently unable to implement protection**

A newly formed global health protection system, funded and established within the UN, but independent of the veto accorded to the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council is urgently required.

The permanent members of the Security Council (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the USA) are affected by their conflicts of interest when inhibiting protection. All 5 are global leaders in the sale of major weapons.

Unlike the poverty present in some countries where armed conflict is present (especially in S-S Africa), the permanent members have good maternal and child health indicators.

**Distribution without adequate ethical regulation is the main cause of global insecurity. Ethical foreign policies are needed.**

Analysis of the 7 countries who exported the most weapons between 2019-2023 (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute <https://www.sipri.org> SIPRI 2024) shows that 5 of the 7 were permanent members of the UN Security Council.

The leading countries exporting major weapons were: 1. USA (42%), 2. Russia (11%), 3. France (11%), 4. China (5.8%), 5 Germany 5.6%, 6. Italy (4.3%) and 7. UK (3.7%).

*(Percentages represent proportions of total global exports)*

# Aligning with Global Strategies: FIGO and RCOG

## **Our Call to Action Builds on Global Commitments:**

- FIGO Global Strategy on Reproductive Justice and Humanitarian Response:  
Emphasizes the rights of women and girls to quality, respectful care, regardless of context.
  - RCOG Advocacy for Safe Motherhood in Crisis Zones:  
Urges global solidarity to protect maternal and newborn health during emergencies.
  - Joint action aligned with these frameworks is essential to ensure equity, dignity, and lifesaving care for women in conflict-affected regions.
- “Equity in care, innovation in action”—requires a globally aligned, ethically driven health response in times of conflict.

## Conclusions

MCAI urges all professionals concerned with maternal, infant, and child healthcare to lobby for the development of an adequate international protection system for health in countries affected by armed conflict

Ideally, all governments must adopt ethical foreign policies



## Equity in care, innovation in action

Armed conflict represents one of the main global problems damaging the lives of pregnant women and adolescent girls

## Thank you

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