Afghanistan: Medical Facilities Targeted

Author: Farid Tanha
Event hears of disturbing trend that has put health care workers at increasing risk.

Medical facilities and their staff are increasingly at risk of attack by armed groups in Afghanistan, according to speakers at a debate organised by IWPR in Kapisa province.

An audience of more than 120 people at the July 22 debate heard that concerns were growing over what appeared to be a clear pattern.

Abdul Mutaleb Hamed, a human rights activist working in Kapisa, Parwan and Panjshir provinces, said that militant groups, government soldiers and foreign forces had all attacked medical facilities in recent years.

He noted the notorious October 2016 incident in which US forces bombed a hospital in Kunduz, killing more than 40 health workers and patients, and added that an Islamic State-affiliated group had attacked Kabul’s Sardar Daud hospital in February 2017, killing 30 staff and patients.

"The 1948 Geneva convention and Afghan law condemns attacks on hospitals and health centres," he continued, warning that many religious leaders regarded human rights as an alien import from the West.

He called on the government to better educate the public on the importance of protecting medical staff.

However Gul Mohammad, the chairman of Kapisa’s council of religious scholars, said that targeting medical facilities was clearly a breach of Shariah law.

"When the prophet deployed an army for war, he would emphasise that they must not harm women, children and elderly people, as well as public welfare buildings, farmland, and private houses," he said. "But in Afghanistan, extremist groups do not differentiate between the military and civilians."

Mohammad Shoaib Danish, the provincial director of public health, said that doctors treated patients regardless of gender, religion, language and origin, “which shows their impartiality”.

"Health centres provide everyone with services equally and without discrimination," he continued, also emphasising that the armed opposition failed to respect such principles.

Danish noted a number of incidents over the last two years that he said were of particular concern.

These ranged from an attack in which the director of Pachghan’s health clinic was killed to the apparently deliberate targeting of an ambulance from Tagab hospital, which led to the death of the driver. Elsewhere, he continued, “a doctor was wounded in Hisa-e Awal Kohistan district, and a missile attack launched against the hospital in Nejrab district”.

Hashmatullah Ishaqzada, the director of Kapisa’s association of civil society groups, said that it seemed to be open season on medical professionals.

“The hospitals and health workers are threatened not only by the opponents of the government but also from local armed groups and strongmen, who also harass them,” he said, adding that there was little or no redress for such actions.

He recalled how after one clash between armed groups in 2016, wounded fighters had been brought to Deh Baba Ali hospital for treatment, but forced their way out before the police could arrest them. The previous year, he continued, a dormitory for midwives came under missile attack in Hisa-e Awal Kohistan.

"Several midwives were wounded, but the police failed to identify or arrest the perpetrators," Ishaqzada said.

Mohammad Ayub Yusufzai, the head of press at Kapisa police headquarters, said that the security forces did their best to prevent such attacks.

“The armed government opponents attack hospitals, kill wounded people and behead prisoners. They have no mercy on men, women, elderly or the young."

Yusufzai said that Kapisa police had prevented several attacks, but complained that when they made arrests, local politicians and strongmen alike often put pressure on the security forces to release suspects.

Location: Afghanistan