

BATTLING BEYOND THE FRONTLINE: WAR'S TOLL ON MEDICAL CARE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Dr Ammara Riaz

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Health and well-being are fundamental rights of humanity that cannot be achieved without peace and security.¹ In recent times, wars and conflicts have been imposing detrimental effects on not only those directly involved in combat but also civilians, families, communities, institutions, and the environment, leading to large scale destruction of infrastructure and loss of human life.² According to Small Arms Survey, armed conflicts cause 133,750 deaths each year. However, this estimate does not include indirect attributable mortality due to conflicts.³ Apart from increased mortality and disability, armed conflicts have many secondary consequences, where attacks on health facilities act as catalysts for health system disruptions, badly affecting healthcare delivery and access to curative and preventive services. It is also evident that health repercussions are severe for vulnerable populations such as children, women, elderly and those with chronic diseases.⁴ A study from WHO highlights that maternal mortality rates in conflict zones can increase dramatically due to a lack of accessible prenatal and postnatal care.⁵

The effect of wars on healthcare delivery, access and equity has complex mechanisms caused by diversion of critical resources away from healthcare leading to broader socioeconomic consequences. Conflicts lead to a perfect storm for public health crisis causing displacement of populations leading to overcrowded living conditions where diseases spread rapidly. Moreover, inadequate sanitation, interrupted vaccination and disease control programs, communicable disease outbreaks, lack of safe water, food and medication further discourage the situation

in such fragile environments.⁶

The chaos of war not only impacts the physical infrastructure but also hinders the provision of health services. The healthcare workers struggle hard to work in unsafe conditions and ultimately leaving for their safety results in severe shortage of human resources. The brain-drain and psychological toll on remaining healthcare workers make the situation worse in coping with overwhelming demands and inadequate resources.⁷

The first target of Sustainable Development Goal 16 requires member states to 'significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere'.⁸ Recent Pakistan-India clashes have sparked the debate of unstable political conditions and their devastating consequences on health system, revealing the fragility of healthcare in conflict zones. Being nuclear powers, both countries must act wisely in maintaining peace in the region. However, it is crucial to advocate for the strengthening of health systems through proper allocation of resources to combat any worse scenario. Policies and health interventions should be designed beforehand to ensure access to healthcare services, adequate nutrition, safe water, and a clean environment. Moreover, the timely development of comprehensive emergency preparedness plans, stockpiling of essential medicines, and training and capacity building of healthcare providers are the need of the hour.

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1. *Community Medicine Allama Iqbal Medical College, Lahore.*

Correspondence:

Dr Ammara Riaz, Assistant Professor Community Medicine; Allama Iqbal Medical College, Lahore. Email: docammara2@gmail.com

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