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Amnesty International urges a stronger human rights role for nurses and midwives

In advance of the Congress of the International Council of Nurses taking place in Taipei next week, Amnesty International is calling for the human rights of nurses and midwives to be better protected worldwide and for nursing organizations to renew their commitment to protecting the human rights of patients and the public.

In some countries, nurses have been targeted by governments and opposition movements because of their professional or political activities. By defending nurses' human rights, the community strengthens nurses' capacity to protect the rights and interests of patients and to contribute to a more just society.

The global problem of violence against women -- the theme of a current long-term AI campaign -- is one impacting on nurses daily. Women facing such violence need sympathetic care as well as protection from further abuse. Accomplishing this is a major challenge and opportunity for nurses.

In conflict areas, nurses work with physicians and other health workers to provide effective health care at considerable risk to their own security. The risk is aggravated when the Geneva Conventions are not respected and health personnel are deliberately targeted. In several areas the impact of conflict and poverty is exacerbating the already difficult burden of caring for people living with HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. And everywhere, the impact of violence against women is adding to carers' work pressure and raising ethical challenges for those in the health sector. There remains much to be done to strengthen the nurse's role in protecting women from violence.

Nurses working with people deprived of liberty -- whether prisoners, involuntary psychiatric patients or institutionalised children or elderly people -- must deal with the human rights dimension of incarceration. It is well known that prisoners and long-term institutionalised adults and children are at risk of abuse. Nurses can protect the rights of such people by insisting on respect for the dignity of the patient and on the ethics of the nursing profession.

In many countries, nurses may come under pressure to collaborate in or cover up abuses. Recent reports concerning prisoners arrested in the "war on terrorism" suggest that health personnel have remained silent in the face of ill-treatment of prisoners. Amnesty International has called on health professionals to oppose co-optation into human rights abuses in the name of "security".

In countries having the death penalty, nurses may come under pressure to assist in the carrying out of this punishment. AI welcomes the policy position of the ICN and many national nursing associations

opposing nurses' participation in executions, and commends the ICN policy to work for the abolition of the death penalty.

Nurses can also find themselves at risk of serious human rights violations. One of the most compelling cases known to AI at the present time is that of five Bulgarian nurses who, together with a Palestinian doctor, were sentenced to death by firing squad in May 2004 in Libya for deliberately infecting 426 children with HIV while working in al-Fateh Children's Hospital in Benghazi. Expert medical evidence given at the trial absolved them from the accusation made against them. The six health professionals have retracted the confessions which form the only evidence against them, claiming they were made under torture. Ten police officers are currently on trial concerning the alleged torture. The Libyan Supreme Court is due to pronounce on the nurses' final appeal on 31 May 2005. If the death sentences are confirmed, they cannot be implemented without the consent of the country's highest judicial body, the Supreme Council of Judicial Bodies.

Nurses face increasingly complex ethical decisions in their daily work while at the same time facing violence in the workplace. This illustrates the need for continuing professional and human rights education, continuing advocacy by nursing organizations and individuals, and more effective protection of the nurse's working environment and labour rights.

Since the 19th century, nurses have embodied the concepts of care and compassion in their work. In the first decade of the 21st century there is a greater need than ever for nurses to continue this tradition and contribute to the strengthening of human rights protection of those most vulnerable in society. The 2005 Congress in Taipei offers an opportunity for a re-statement of this commitment.