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February 26, 2018

Hon. Chrystia Freeland
Minister of Foreign Affairs
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6
By e-mail: chrystia.freeland@parl.gc.ca

Dear Minister Freeland,

On behalf of the nearly 200,000 nurses and nursing students represented by the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU), I write to express our members' grave concern regarding reports of recurring attacks against medical facilities in Eastern Ghouta, Syria. According to the Syrian American Medical Society, 25 hospital and health centres have been hit by shelling and artillery in recent weeks. These attacks grossly violate international humanitarian law which places at its core the necessity to protect medical personnel and facilities from conflict. They must stop.

This offensive in Ghouta by the Syrian Government, supported by foreign allies, is the latest in years of horror and trauma experienced by civilians and medical professionals in this region. These horrors include sarin gas attacks in 2013, endless bombings and repeated obstruction of humanitarian aid delivery. In late 2017, physicians in Ghouta sent a letter to the Director-General of the World Health Organization, stating "Once, we were family doctors, pediatricians, specialists... now we are specialists in war trauma, chemical attacks and siege-induced starvation."

Minister, Canada's nurses firmly believe that our country must be an international leader in efforts to guarantee security for all health care workers and facilities in conflict zones. Alongside our international health care allies, we are calling on you to deepen the enforcement of UN Resolution 2286, which includes a demand to end impunity for those responsible for attacks on medical personnel in conflict situations. We echo the appeals from the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition, of which CFNU is a member, for new mechanisms to enforce compliance with international humanitarian law among parties to conflict, and hold parties accountable for violations. Further, we echo the Coalition's call for the establishment of a new international commission of inquiry to independently investigate alleged violations of international humanitarian law.

The Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 explicitly enshrines hospitals in conflict zones as protected spaces. Yet, nearly 70 years later, violations of this convention continue to be carried out with complete impunity. We cannot rest while hospitals, clinics and medical personnel remain in the cross-hairs of warring parties. We cannot rest while those that perpetrate these violations do so without fear of accountability before international law. With the world paying close attention, Canada must urgently work with the international community to implement new measures to ensure the tragedies of Ghouta are never repeated.

Thank you for your careful attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Linda Silas', written in a cursive style.

Linda Silas

President