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## Humanitarian crisis and the role of nursing schools

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In its “Spirit of Foundation,” the Japanese Red Cross Kyushu International College of Nursing states that *“The Japanese Red Cross Academy of Nursing and its affiliated colleges expect our future alumni, in the spirit of the Red Cross, to take an active part in protecting human life and dignity in large-scale disasters and disputes regardless of nationality, as well as faithfully carry out their mission as nurses and care providers.”*

Alleviating the suffering and saving the lives of people affected by armed conflicts and situations of violence have always been challenging for health professionals, particularly for nurses who are working in close proximity to the victims. Today, it has become even harder mainly because of the changes that the world is undergoing.

### A changing world

The world is undergoing impressive changes: the globalisation of the economy, the climate change, the demographic evolution of the world population and the political destabilisation of many countries contribute to the emergence of new severe humanitarian crisis affecting people’s health and dignity.

#### Global trends that have a direct impact on health

##### Growing urbanization

In 2007 the percentages of urban population began to be higher than those of the rural population. It contributes to create large groups of population living in extreme poverty in the suburbs of megacities. Furthermore, in those settings violence becomes the rule.

The world population is getting older and in several less developed countries, health systems have to face on-going health problems such as malaria, HIV, tuberculosis and at the same time new problems such as diabetes, high blood pressure, etc.

##### Climate change

It will lead to dramatic consequences such as large migrations of people, increased drought and stress on water resources, extension of several vector-borne communicable diseases into new geographic areas. Those vulnerabilities are closely linked together. For instances:

- ☒ In some rural areas the climate change contributes to reduction of food production, which has an impact on child nutrition and ultimately on child mortality : *“Among young children, malnutrition is an underlying cause in over 60% of deaths resulting from diarrhoea, over 50% of deaths as a result of pneumonia and malaria, and over 40% of deaths as a result of measles.”*<sup>1</sup>
- ☒ In the field on communicable diseases, the example of Uganda is quite illustrative of the intricate causes leading to an increased incidence of malaria : *“the apparently worsening malaria situation is attributed to a number of factors: epidemiological shifts due to*

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<sup>1</sup> WHO - Communicable diseases and severe food shortage October 2010

*climate change, environmental factors increasing breeding sites for mosquitoes, increasing resistance to anti-malarial drugs, weak health system with poor quality treatment.*<sup>2</sup>

- Large populations may have to migrate.

### **Global trends that have a direct impact on conflicts**

Climate change is also perceived as a potential source of conflict: *“the potential consequences of climate change for water availability, food security and prevalence of disease, coastal boundaries and population distribution may aggravate existing tensions and generate new conflicts.”*<sup>3</sup>

Confronted to an increasing level of structural violence, some states don't have the means or the willingness to cope with the health and security needs of their population opening the door for new forms of humanitarian actions.

Armed conflicts, even if their number seems to have decreased over the past years, have a tremendous impact on civilian population who are often the primary victims. Either because the armed groups specifically target them and/or because they cannot have access to health services that have become inefficient or have been destroyed. Furthermore, the fundamental rights of people are violated. The systematic use of sexual violence as a means of warfare is a dramatic example of how much women suffer in armed conflicts.

### **Humanitarian action in the near future: a challenge for nurses**

Professor Etsuko Kita describes the goal of the Japanese Red Cross Kyushu International College of Nursing in preparing the nurses to face the humanitarian challenges of the changing world as follows:

*“Using humanitarian principles of the Red Cross, we foster nursing experts who can reach out to all the people that need help regardless of nationality, at any time, any place, and in any situation. Thus, we expect our students to work jointly to solve problems and challenge new problems with desire while acknowledging the diversity and the heterogeneity of each other in the midst of globalization.”*

This statement contains key issues for future humanitarian action:

- The reference to humanitarian principles in a world losing the fundamental values
- The adaptation to a changing world

Armed conflicts and situation of widespread violence create long lasting humanitarian crisis where political solutions cannot be found. Meanwhile health and people's integrity are at stake, due to direct effects of war (death, injuries, forced displacements) and, on the other hand, due to indirect effects such as the destruction of the health infrastructure, the deterioration of economic systems disrupting, in particular, food supply, the destruction of social relations, and the absence of any national mechanism to secure their protection. This is obvious in situations where the violation of fundamental rights constitutes a veritable war strategy aimed at eliminating populations (genocide), making people flee (ethnic cleansing), destroying people and thereby the foundations of a society by targeting specific groups, such as female victims of sexual violence.

Therefore, health and the integrity of populations are intricately linked. In Darfur, DRC civilians are continually exposed to violence in their daily activities and subjected to

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<sup>2</sup> MOH Uganda : An Assessment of the Impact of climate change on the Health Sector in Uganda: A case of Malaria and Cholera epidemics and how to improve planning for effective preparedness and response. May 2009

<sup>3</sup> UNEP - From Conflict to Peacebuilding: The Role of Natural Resources and the Environment (Nairobi, 2009)

sexual and gender-based harassment. In the literature, numerous epidemiological studies highlight the correlation between forced displacements and a disastrous increase in the mortality rates of the populations affected.

### **The role of nurses in humanitarian action**

Strategies of humanitarian action have been adopted to cope with this development. The main priority is to restore and maintain the health of persons and people struggling with the consequences of war and, at the same time, to protect their integrity.

In practice, nurses have a key role to play in both aspects: health and integrity. It is now recognised that their contribution to the protection of fundamental rights is important for the following reasons:

- ☒ Presence with the population combined with their health-related activities,
- ☒ Adherence to the humanitarian principles, which, in some cases, contributes to increase their acceptance by the populations and by the stakeholders involved in the conflicts and the use of violence.

In the past, nurses have done a tremendous work to alleviate the suffering of the victims of wars. In the coming future, they will continue to do so, even if the evolution of the world and the constraints in insecure environment make this task much harder. However, they will have to be specifically trained for that.

### **How nursing schools prepare for humanitarian action**

Knowledge and skills to deal with the health components of humanitarian crisis can be acquired through specific training courses. It can be short training courses such as the H.E.L.P.<sup>4</sup> that cover health and integrity issues in humanitarian crisis. This course is offered at the Japanese Red Cross Kyushu International College of Nursing every two years.

Considering the complexity of disasters and armed conflicts and of the responses to those situations, short courses cannot provide all the necessary knowledge. Constantly, new tools, strategies and even disciplines emerge in humanitarian action as for example war epidemiology, a discipline that aims at establishing evidence-based between hostilities and their impact on health and human rights. The use of epidemiological tools to assess and quantify the level of human rights violations has already proved its efficiency by setting the extent of the violations and provides an unchallenged basis for making proposals for action. This is illustrated in the following epidemiological study on sexual violence in Uganda:

*“Over a quarter (28.6%) of the women and 6.7% of the men reported having suffered at least one form of war related sexual violence.... these results have the following implications for the observance of human rights in sub-Saharan Africa and for dealing with the medical and psychological health consequences of their abuse: Firstly, governments particularly in Africa, should be urged and supported not only to ratify and domesticate the various international conventions against war trauma including war related sexual violence, they should be held accountable to make sure that these laws are upheld within their areas of jurisdiction.”<sup>5</sup>*

In this type of studies the nurses have an important role in helping to collect and analyse the information, and most importantly to make sure that they are conducted according to relevant ethical rules. Obviously they can do their duties in this matter only if they have learned how to do it professionally.

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<sup>4</sup> HELP : Health Emergencies in Large Populations

<sup>5</sup> BMC International Health and Human Rights 2010 - War related sexual violence and it's medical and psychological consequences as seen in Kitgum, Northern Uganda: A cross-sectional study

- ☒ Nurses may benefit from the development of short modules looking at humanitarian actions from the various angles of public health:
- ☒ New health issues in relation with the global trends mentioned above
- ☒ Human right violations and the applicability of epidemiological tools
- ☒ Health economy in fragile states and the role of health humanitarian actions
- ☒ The involvement of health professional in humanitarian diplomacy
- ☒ The management of public health in influencing the conduct of hostilities
- ☒ Health professional and advocacy: roles and limitations