



Health for All Now!

People's Health Movement

Health Conditions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

May 2024

Background

For close to 8 months now, Israeli forces have subjected the Gaza Strip to a campaign of military violence, forced displacement and physical destruction that has killed over 36,000 Palestinians.¹ In March 2024 UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese found that “there are reasonable grounds to believe that the threshold indicating the commission of the crime of genocide...has been met”.² In retaliation for the October 7th Hamas-led incursion into Israel – in which 1200 people were killed and 250 were taken hostage – Israel has carried out one of the heaviest conventional bombing campaigns of all time, and arguably the single most destructive military campaign on any territory since World War II.³

The assault on Gaza is an assault on the right to health

The 2.2 million Gaza residents who are still alive face an unprecedented public health catastrophe. Urgent crises of starvation, thirst, sanitation and displacement affect everyone within Gaza’s borders, and are worsening by the day.

Widespread, man-made starvation has overtaken Gaza. Families in the north have resorted at times to eating birdseed, animal feed, leaves, weeds and grass.⁴ Israel is intentionally using starvation as a weapon of war, according to the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food.⁵ These findings were echoed by Oxfam and B’Tselem, who reported that the deprivation of food aid, water and sanitation equipment, and other

¹ <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-231>

² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147976>

³ <https://www.ft.com/content/7b407c2e-8149-4d83-be01-72dcae8aee7b>

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2024/03/29/1241148952/gaza-hunger-famine-aid-israel-hamas-war>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/27/un-israel-food-starvation-palestinians-war-crime-genocide>

supplies is a deliberate result of Israeli military policy.⁶ The failure of an occupying power to ensure access to basic necessities is a war crime.

For months, as much as 95% of Gaza's population has been forced to rely on unsafe and salinated water. Some 1.7 million people are internally displaced, with many living in overcrowded shelters and makeshift tent cities. Sanitation facilities are hardly available. A UNICEF report in March found that, on average, one toilet was being shared by 341 internally-displaced persons and one shower with an average of 1292 others.⁷ Unsurprisingly, infectious diseases are running rampant in the population of Gaza. In March, Save The Children revealed a devastating reality: Gaza's children are enduring 'complete psychological destruction,' highlighting a crisis that demands urgent attention.⁸

Israel is systematically attacking the Gaza health system

The Israeli army has systematically targeted healthcare facilities in Gaza,⁹ destroying infrastructure and killing or imprisoning healthcare workers. As of 15 May, at least 450 attacks have been documented.¹⁰

Not a single hospital in Gaza is fully functional and only 42% are partially functional,¹¹ meaning that they “provide limited services, are overwhelmed with patients, and face critical shortages of fuel, medicines, medical supplies, and health personnel.”¹² The dire situation is exacerbated by Israel's import restrictions, which have blocked or severely limited entry of essential items as innocuous as medical scissors, insulin pens, anaesthetics and oxygen.¹³

⁶ <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/inflicting-unprecedented-suffering-and-destruction-seven-ways-the-government-of-621591/>;
https://www.btselem.org/gaza_strip/20240108_israel_is_starving_gaza

⁷ https://www.unicef.org/sop/media/3811/file/UNICEF_State_of_Palestine_Humanitarian_Situation_Repor_No._20_.pdf

⁸ <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/complete-psychological-destruction-children-gaza-have-suffered-relentless-mental-harm-during>

⁹ <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/destruction-of-medical-infrastructure-in-gaza>

¹⁰ <https://www.emro.who.int/images/stories/Sitrep.pdf>

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-148>

¹³ https://www.democracynow.org/2024/3/12/headlines/israel_blocks_aid_truck_bound_for_gaza_because_it_contained_medical_scissors; <https://palestine.un.org/en/258722-un-humanitarian-coordinator-humanitarians-are-struggling-provide-displaced-people-basic>; <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/03/01/middleeast/gaza-aid-israel-restrictions-investigation-intl-cmd/index.html>

Maternal healthcare is almost non-existent, leaving Gaza's 60,000 pregnant women with little or no prenatal care. An average of 183 women give birth each day without the support of healthcare providers or facilities during or after delivery.¹⁴ In short, the healthcare system of Gaza is barely surviving.

End the genocidal violence. End the apartheid. End the colonial occupation

The dire health conditions in Gaza predate October 7th, 2023. Palestine has been in a health crisis for at least 75 years.¹⁵ Limitations on free movement, arbitrary and dehumanizing searches and detentions, destruction of property and threats of physical violence have been a fact of daily life for Palestinians long before this war.

For years, attempts by Palestinians to demonstrate peacefully to demand their right to self-determination have been met with ruthless violence, including against children. Conditions of overcrowding in the open-air prison of Gaza increase the risks of non-communicable and infectious diseases. Israel's blockade of Gaza since 2007 generates artificial scarcity of the essentials of life, including clean water, healthy food, medical essentials and reliable energy. The scarcity of electricity, in particular, is a major impediment to the safe and reliable provision of medical care. Moreover, access to specialized healthcare is severely limited, as patients need permits to travel for health in different parts of the occupied Palestinian territory.¹⁶

In other words, the crisis that Gazans are experiencing now is the latest and most severe escalation of a decades-long assault on the health of Palestinians. For the right to health to be achieved in Palestine, the occupation and system of apartheid – which is the most important social determinant of them all – must come to an end.

Call to Action

As two percent of all Gazans have been murdered, most nations are watching in indifferent silence. We decry the unconscionable and illegal attacks on healthcare that have marked Israel's offensive against Gaza. We call on all parties to take all available measures to end the violence, to protect healthcare workers and facilities, to restore critical public health infrastructure, and to flood the Strip with much-needed aid. Above all else, the most immediately impactful public health intervention available in Gaza today is an immediate cessation of hostilities.

¹⁴ <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/pregnant-women-and-mothers-gaza-are-fighting-keep-themselves-and-their-babies-alive>

¹⁵ <https://www.hhrjournal.org/2023/11/occupation-is-a-public-health-crisis-too/>

¹⁶ <https://www.emro.who.int/opt/news/patients-in-the-gaza-strip-unable-to-obtain-israeli-issued-permits-to-access-the-healthcare.html>

PHM calls on the WHO to:

1. Continue advocating for an immediate and permanent ceasefire;
2. Continue supporting the humanitarian response in Gaza, and use all means available to increase aid and medical support entering Gaza; and
3. Acknowledge and address the most important social determinant affecting Palestinian health: the illegal occupation and apartheid conditions in Palestine.

PHM calls on WHO member states to:

1. Demand an immediate and permanent ceasefire and immediately cease weapons transfers to Israel;
2. Flood Gaza with humanitarian aid and medical assistance; restore and increase UNRWA funding;
3. Recognise and respond to the call of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, included in her report to the 55th Session of the Human Rights Council, to enforce the prohibition of genocide in accordance with their non-derogable obligations;¹⁷
4. Recognize the Palestinians' right to self-determination and their right of return;
5. Contribute to rebuilding the health system of Gaza. Reconstruction should be undertaken within the context of a Palestine that is free of apartheid and occupation.
6. Support the establishment of a Palestinian State and advance processes to achieve this goal.

PHM Democratising Global Health Governance Programme

¹⁷<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session55/advance-versions/a-hrc-55-73-auv.pdf>