

Medical facilities under intense pressure in Gaza

Medical clinics in Gaza are struggling to treat an overwhelming number of casualties following Israel's 3-week assault on the isolated enclave. Jan McGirk reports from Jerusalem.

The best-equipped medical facility in the Gaza Strip resembled a charnal house. Corpses were strewn on the floor after morgue refrigerators inside Al Shifa—a 585-bed hospital in Gaza City—were packed to capacity in the first week of the Israeli military offensive in the Palestinian enclave. Doctors were reduced to treating the injured on the floor and doing surgery by flashlight. Up to three different patients and a dozen doctors crammed into each operating theatre, and the intensive care unit, with 25 beds, was utterly overwhelmed.

Hospital director Hussain Ashaur, concerned about the heightened risks of infection for severe trauma and burn cases, appealed to health officials and aid agencies for additional refrigerator equipment before the bodies began to decompose. On Jan 7, when Israel implemented its first 3-h “humanitarian corridor” to pause hostilities and allow the distribution of food and supplies, the hospital started to clear out the dead.

“These are scenes out of Dante’s *Inferno*. Many arrive with extreme amputations, with both legs crushed, [and what] I suspect are wounds inflicted by very powerful explosives called Dime [Dense inert metal explosive]”, Mads Gilbert, a visiting Norwegian surgeon at Al-Shifa, told reporters. “Rice-size fragments are embedded in their skin.”

Lacking specialist doctors to treat the horrific injuries and burns, as well as basic equipment such as syringes and gloves, medical clinics inside Gaza are under intense pressure. UN relief agencies say the trickle of food and supplies allowed in during the 3-h humanitarian corridor in fighting each day is insufficient.

Neonatal deaths have increased by 10% as new mothers are dispatched

home early. Vaccination programmes have been suspended. Physicians are hard-pressed to deal with Gaza’s chronically ill patients. Nearly 70% of chronic patients have had their treatment at Primary Health Centres interrupted because of security concerns. Most basic clinics have been converted into first aid centres.

Access to the wounded remains an urgent concern. At least 12 paramedics were killed by recent shelling, even though they were in clearly marked emergency vehicles. Others reportedly

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were fired on while treating injured civilians at the roadside. Families remain trapped under bombed-out buildings or caught in crossfire while evacuation procedures are coordinated with Israeli commanders.

In a harshly critical statement, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) accused Israel of failing in its international obligations after one medical team encountered 12 corpses in a shelled house in Zeitoun last week. Four very young children, too weak to stand, waited listlessly beside their dead mothers. Aid workers had been denied access to the site for days, and found the hungry, dehydrated children. “This is a shocking incident”, Pierre Wettach, ICRC head for Israel and the Palestinian territories said in a statement. “The Israeli military must have been aware of the situation but did not assist the wounded. Neither did they make it possible for us or the Palestinian Red Crescent to assist the wounded.” Mark Regev, spokesman for the Israeli Prime Minister’s office, said the incident would be fully investigated.

Even before Israel’s aerial assault began on Dec 27, the public-health infrastructure inside the Gaza Strip was precarious because an 18-month blockade has created a dearth of drugs and spare parts for crucial medical equipment. Fuel shortages put hospital patients, dependent on backup generators for hours at a time, at grave risk. Without sufficient fuel for ambulances, donkey carts often haul the wounded. But 3 weeks of bombardment and tank fire has put the health services on the brink of collapse.

Most patients needing kidney dialysis or radiation treatment have been prevented from crossing sealed borders to reach hospitals abroad. According to WHO, 189 patients have been transferred to Egypt through the Rafah crossing in the south since the start of the latest hostilities, but most were war injuries.

At least 4250 Gazans have been wounded during the past 3 weeks, according to Muawiya Hassanein, the head of Gaza emergency services, with close to 900 people killed. About a third of these casualties were children. Ten Israeli soldiers and three civilians have been killed in the conflict since the start of military actions.

After Palestinian medics in southern Gaza reported tending patients with unusual burns and distress from apparent gas inhalations, Human Rights Watch criticised Israel for using white phosphorous in its current Gaza operations.

Gaza City’s main sewage treatment plant has been hit by bombing and its fetid lake, containing 300 000 m³ of human waste, has sprung a leak. Being drowned by sewage could cause a death toll far higher than that of the military action so far, experts warn.

Jan McGirk



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