

An urgent call to save and protect lives of vulnerable populations in the Gaza Strip

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As of 17th October 2023, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), there are currently 12,500 injured individuals (52% women and children).¹ After 8 days of escalating conflict in the Gaza Strip since 7th October 2023, electricity limited to few hours a day is insufficient to keep the lowest requirements for saving lives, and essential medical supplies are running out. Equipment will soon cease to function, resulting in more lives lost, in addition to the 3000 already killed.¹

We are currently witnessing in Gaza, one of the largest and most rapid internal displacements of recent times. The evacuation within 24 h of approximately 1.1 million people ordered by the government of Israel, is unrealistic and perilous, and has already forced an exodus of over 600,000 children and adults living in the north of the Gaza Strip.¹ Families on the move are joining the thousands who are already enduring hardship in the south, gathering at borders. Those with nowhere to go are left stranded on the streets in desperation.

Providing both emergency health care and continuity of care for patients, including access to life saving treatments and medicines for kidney dialysis patients, cancer patients, intubated ICU patients, neonates in incubators, patients waiting for operations and pregnant women in the Gaza Strip, seems impossible, but is the desperate need. Beit Hanoun Hospital and Dar Al Dur

Childrens hospital are not functional after Israeli shelling and at least 23 ambulances have been destroyed. Al-Quds Hospital (Gaza City) affiliated with the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS) has not been evacuated and health personnel risking their lives continue to provide lifesaving services. The recent killing of four PRCS staff are a reminder that the safety of health and humanitarian personnel has not been protected so far by Israel.² As evidenced in the past, such attacks severely impact the health system cutting the last hope for those in danger and distress.³

In the coming days, extreme water and food shortage and overcrowding and poor sanitation pose a serious risk of waterborne diseases and outbreaks of epidemics like cholera and vaccine-preventable diseases. Patients with non-communicable diseases and chronic illness will have no access to health care and despite the willingness of health personal to provide services they will not be able to do so without medical supplies.

Despite global and United Nations accords, agreements, conventions, and the Sustainable Development Goals, the fate of over 600,000 children and adults remains precarious. The violence affects multiple dimensions of precarity, including work and livelihoods, the increasing temporariness and transience experienced by relocated individuals, inadequate housing and sanitation conditions, and heightened exposure to violence and exploitation during their displacement.

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These dimensions have been shown to result in poorer health outcomes and increased impoverishment.⁴ In the context of the Gaza strip where 60% of the population live below the poverty line the consequences will be devastating.

Child malnutrition is not a new phenomenon in Gaza and is likely to worsen due to food shortages with long term consequences such as delayed physical development and increased mortality. Children in Gaza, already familiar with traumatic experiences, are living with an activated stress system. With this conflict, the stress is expected to intensify, potentially leading to the development of Post traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) or complex PTSD in both children and adults. This stress can also be transgenerational, impacting children for decades to come.⁵

We are deeply concerned about the loss of lives and those at risk, as well as the physical and mental health consequences of the ongoing humanitarian crisis, particularly for innocent children, women, the elderly, and other civilians in the Gaza Strip. Without the provision of shelter, food, clean water, healthcare, and protection services in safe spaces and the establishment of movement corridors, more lives will be lost.

The need is to save lives now, prevent further losses, and safeguard health and well-being in this complex and evolving situation in Gaza, as well as the wider region that will be impacted by the enforced mass movement. This requires the safe passage of humanitarian aid, especially medicines, and the protection of hospitals and medical personnel as per international laws and conventions. We ask for provision of psychological first aid as well as mental health and psychological support (MHPSS) to the displaced communities. Support, especially for the mental, psychological, and physical well-being of health workers, is also crucial in this emergency setting.

We support the WHO's call for immediate reversal of the Gaza evacuation order⁶ and urgently call for

supporting peaceful interventions to enable saving the lives of vulnerable populations in the Gaza strip.

Contributors

AA, KAG and BK developed idea and theme for the correspondence. AA, KAG and BK developed the draft. All authors participated and contributed to the revision of the text several times and agreed to the proposed recommendations.

Editorial note

The Lancet Group takes a neutral position with respect to territorial claims in published text and institutional affiliations.

Declaration of interests

There are no competing interests.

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