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WHO FACT SHEET: Right to Health Issues in the oPt

Barriers to Health Care

Shortages of Essential Medicines and Disposables

Ministry of Health (MoH) in Gaza central pharmacy stores report 42% of essential medications are at zero stock, with an additional 13% at levels sufficient for less than 3 months. In the West Bank, 28% of medications were at zero stock as of early May. In Gaza, the MoH no longer can supply patients with drugs for severely debilitating chronic diseases such as multiple sclerosis as well as first line antibiotics at primary health clinic level. At hospital level, shortages have affected oncology treatment, surgeries and dialysis.

Chronic shortages have been reported in Gaza since 2006, caused primarily by political divisions between the West Bank and Gaza. More recently shortages have been exacerbated by financial shortfalls in the Palestinian Authority budget. Patients now purchase their medications from private pharmacies or seek donations from charities. Patients with life-threatening diseases or chronic disease who need maintenance medications, and poor and elderly patients, are especially affected.

Fuel and Energy Shortages in Gaza

Electricity supply in Gaza is unstable with 12-hour to 16-hour daily power cuts daily as power is rationed. Restrictions on imports of equipment and fuel have led to inadequate capacity of power plant turbines serving the Gaza Strip for many years.

The chronic fuel and energy shortages in Gaza directly affect MoH health services. In late May, hospitals were functioning with only 13% (3-4 days) fuel reserves. They depend on back-up generators (which require increased fuel supplies to continue operations) and independent battery units for critical equipment. Unreliable power has damaged some medical equipment. While Ministry of Health hospitals, with ad hoc donor assistance, have made efforts to maintain fuel reserves to ensure a constant supply of electricity for critical units, they operate under increased technical and financial strain. At household level, electricity cuts cause disruptions with daily life needs: water supply, refrigeration needs and other areas affecting health.

Restrictions on Movement of Health Staff

Movement for medical and other health personnel is restricted between Gaza and West Bank, and to East Jerusalem, dependent on an Israeli-issued permit. This affects health services planning, long-term training for medical and health students at the main teaching hospitals in East Jerusalem, and short-term continuous education. In a rapid survey, WHO found that 10-20% of requests for permits are denied, with no reasons given, or are delayed past the time requested.

More than 1,000 staff at the main Palestinian referral hospitals in East Jerusalem also require permits, given only for 6-month periods and restricted to entering Jerusalem only through specified checkpoints and on foot.

Ambulance Access for Emergency Cases

The main provider of emergency services in the West Bank, the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, report their ambulances are routinely denied access from the West Bank to East Jerusalem when

transferring patients to Palestinian hospitals. Only **49 ambulances** were able to proceed directly to East Jerusalem hospitals in 2011. The other 1,025 ambulances had to make back-to-back transfers of patients into Israeli-licensed ambulances at the checkpoint, delaying health access for patients and exposing them to the elements.

Referrals of Gaza Patients to Outside Facilities

33% of the 12,000 MoH patients from Gaza referred to outside facilities are destined to Egypt, through Rafah border crossing, while 30% are to East Jerusalem facilities and 10% to the West Bank. In the 5-year period between June 2007 and April 2012, **11,693 patients** were denied Israeli-issued permits to access medical treatment outside of Gaza through the Israeli Erez checkpoint, or their requests were delayed past their appointment date. 197 patients were called for interrogation by Israeli security. In 2011, about one in 10 patients were denied or delayed; in 2010, about one in 6.

Referrals of West Bank Patients to East Jerusalem Facilities

More than 22,000 patients who are financially referred by the Ministry of Health to Palestinian hospitals in East Jerusalem for specialized health care annually require Israeli-issued permits to access and can be denied.

Health Barriers for Patients within West Bank

- 186 rural communities (total population 302,000) have limited access to essential health care due to Israeli-imposed barriers or movement restrictions.
- 249 communities (total population 557,000) have restricted access to emergency health care.
- 529 physical obstacles obstruct Palestinian movement and 70 communities (total population 200,000) must travel 2 to 5 times farther through long detours to the closest city.
- Israeli settler and military violence also affect the movement of people and seriously impede the provision of efficient and effective health care.

Environmental Health Issues - Gaza

In Gaza, the sea water is polluted by run-off of raw sewage to the extent that many beaches are unfit for recreational purposes. The import of materials to build planned sewage treatment plants has been restricted for a number of years, exacerbating the problem of safe sewage treatment.

Water Quantity: Water and sanitation services are affected by the power cuts and fuel shortages. More than 50% of the population receives running water only twice per week. Only 10% of the population receives running water daily, but only for a maximum of 8 hours.

Water Quality: 95% of the water in wells in the Gaza Strip have very high nitrate and chloride levels, 2 to 16 times the WHO recommended maximum levels of 50mg/liter for nitrates.

Environment Health Issues-West Bank

In the West Bank, concern is raised about the potential health impact of an Israeli-operated waste facility on the nearby Palestinian community and on a Bedouin community that may be forcibly relocated to the area. Known health risks to residents of areas near landfills are low birth weight, birth defects, and certain types of cancers, although evidence is inconclusive.

Prisoners Health

The health conditions of the more than 4,000 Palestinian detainees and prisoners was highlighted this spring after a protracted hunger strike by 1,600 detainees against their conditions and long detentions without trial. The strike ended after Israeli guarantees for better conditions.