

12 August 2014 - WHO's Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Dr Ala Alwan made a visit to the Gaza Strip and Ramallah yesterday to witness firsthand the humanitarian conditions in Gaza and review the damage to the health infrastructure and facilities and to discuss priorities. Dr Alwan started his mission in Jerusalem where he met with the Palestinian Minister of Health Dr Jawad Awwad and his senior staff.

Dr Alwan visited three hospitals that had been damaged and were no longer functioning, including the Mohammed Al Durrah pediatric hospital in which 30 people were injured on 24 July. "The level of damage to the health system in Gaza is considerable and requires urgent support from partner and donors," said Dr Alwan. Up to one third of hospitals and one half of primary health care clinics had to be closed either because of damage or because of being in an insecure location for staff and patients.

Dr Alwan visited Gaza's main hospital, Al Shifa, meeting with casualty patients, health workers and the hospital directors who described how the hospital staff had managed to treat the many casualties it received under exceptionally difficult conditions. Dr Alwan congratulated the hospital directors and leaders in the health sector for being able to maintain effective emergency services, even when 240 seriously injured patients arrived at the same time: "Their dedication and highly professional work are greatly appreciated," he said.

More than 300 000 persons have been displaced from damaged homes and have taken refuge in UNRWA and government schools as temporary shelters. Dr Alwan visited one school where more than 1000 people have taken refuge in extremely overcrowded conditions. "I am particularly worried about the risk of waterborne and communicable disease in such settings where overcrowding, poor hygiene and lack of access to clean drinking-water predispose to disease outbreaks. These risks have to be addressed immediately," said Dr Alwan.

UNRWA's Director of Health and also a senior WHO official Dr Akihiro Seita accompanied Dr Alwan during his visit and highlighted the health challenges in shelters: "While we do our best, we are deeply concerned about the health and hygiene situation in our very crowded shelters. Our efforts are limited as a result of heavy damage to the entire water, electricity and sewage systems."

Even if the violence ceases now, more than 50 000 people have already lost their homes.

“Recovery and reconstruction will require an immediate assessment of needs and considerable resources. There is an urgent need to provide mental health support for patients, bereaved families, children and especially for displaced persons, many of whom no longer have a home to go to,” said Dr Alwan.

Palestinian health authorities are planning to refer more patients to hospitals outside of Gaza to access life-saving treatment as well as to reduce the caseload in the hospitals to a more manageable level. There is a need to speed up approvals and procedures to allow these patients to be transported across border crossings. “Referral of patients outside of Gaza to receive specialized treatment will have to be facilitated at all levels,” urged Dr Alwan.

WHO’s Regional Director pledged WHO’s continued support to the Ministry of Health and to the Palestinian health system in general: “Health workers have been doing heroic work since this crisis began. Our WHO staff in Gaza and Ramallah have been working jointly with the Palestinian health authorities in an integrated way in responding to the immediate and urgent needs to support and sustain emergency health services in Gaza throughout the crisis.”

President Mahmoud Abbas, who met with Dr Alwan and his team, thanked WHO staff for their effective contribution and joint work, coordination and partnership with the Palestinian health authorities in Ramallah and Gaza. “We in WHO are committed to providing support in any possible way,” concluded Dr Alwan.

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