

Today, one year after Israel’s military offensive on Gaza, UN Agencies and the Association for International Development Agencies (AIDA), representing over 80 NGOs, are highlighting the impact of the blockade on Gaza on the health of Gaza’s population and on health services - and are calling for an immediate opening of Gaza’s crossings.

Max Gaylard, the Resident Humanitarian Coordinator for the oPt, said on Wednesday 20th January 2010 “The continuing closure of the Gaza Strip is undermining the functioning of the health care system and putting at risk the health of 1.4 million people in Gaza. It is causing on-going deterioration in the social, economic and environmental determinants of health. It is hampering the provision of medical supplies and the training of health staff and it is preventing patients with serious medical conditions getting timely specialised treatment outside Gaza”.

The economy of Gaza is in virtual collapse with rising unemployment and poverty which will have long term adverse effects on the physical and mental health of the population. The environment is also in decline including water quality, sewage and waste disposal and other environmental hazards (including munitions and medical waste) which may lead to long term effects on health.

More than 750,000 children live in Gaza. The humanitarian community is gravely concerned about the future of this generation whose health needs are not being met. The decline in infant mortality, which has occurred steadily over recent decades, has stalled in the last few years.

The lack of building materials as a result of the blockade is affecting essential health facilities: the new surgical wing in Gaza’s main Shifa hospital has remained unfinished since 2006. Hospitals and primary care facilities, damaged during operation ‘Cast Lead’, have not been rebuilt because construction materials are not allowed into Gaza. Operation ‘Cast Lead’ damaged 15 of Gaza’s 27 hospitals and 43 of its 110 primary health care facilities were either damaged or destroyed.

Supplies of drugs and disposables have generally been allowed into Gaza – though there are often shortages on the ground. However, certain types of medical equipment, such as x-ray equipment and electronic devices are very difficult to bring in. Clinical staff frequently lack the medical equipment they need. Medical devices are often broken, missing spare parts or out of date.

Health professionals in Gaza have been cut off from the outside world. Since 2000, very few doctors, nurses or technicians have been able to leave the Strip for training necessary to update their clinical skills or to learn about new medical technology. This is severely undermining their ability to provide quality health care.

Many specialised treatments, for example, complex heart surgery and certain types of cancer, are not available in Gaza and patients are therefore referred for treatment to hospitals outside Gaza. But many patients have had the applications for exit permits denied or delayed by the Israeli Authorities and have missed their appointments. Some have died while waiting for referral.

Tony Laurance, the Head of Office for WHO West Bank and Gaza, said that “An effective health care system cannot be sustained in isolation from the international community. Open borders are needed to ensure the health of the 1.4 million people in Gaza”.

The humanitarian community believes the health sector would face serious problems in dealing with another emergency on the scale of last year’s Operation Cast Lead. The Government of Israel has a legal duty to guarantee the right to health for people in Gaza. The humanitarian community calls for the crossings into Gaza to be reopened.

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