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Editorial

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Another year ends with multiple humanitarian crises ongoing simultaneously across the globe. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, 9 of the 22 Member States and territory are considered fragile or conflict-affected, with severe health consequences for the population (1).

Over the past 2 months, the world's attention has focused on the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. The Hamas attacks in Israel on 7 October 2023 reportedly caused the death of over 1200 Israelis and injury of over 9000; more than 230 people were taken hostage, including children (2,3). There are also reports of sexual and gender-based violence. Israel subsequently declared war on Hamas, which as of 10 December had reportedly caused the death of over 20 000 Gazans – two-thirds estimated to be women and children – and injury of over 52 000 others (3). Thousands more are reportedly missing under the rubble.

The rapidly accelerating military offensive has forced the repeated displacement of over 1.9 million Palestinians into increasingly smaller areas of southern Gaza (3,8). Gaza was already one of the most densely populated places on earth, heavily reliant on humanitarian aid (4). The drastic reductions of the supply of fuel, electricity, water, food, telecommunications, and other services, and much-needed aid to a besieged civilian population is contributing to a rapidly escalating humanitarian crisis (5).

In addition to the dramatic death toll, the public health risks of the war are grave (6). There are reports of increased numbers of respiratory infections, watery diarrhoea, bloody diarrhoea, acute jaundice, scabies, and head lice (7). In massively overcrowded United Nations Relief and Works Agency for the for the Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) shelters, more than 400 people share one toilet (8). An unprecedented 93% of the population in Gaza is facing crisis level of hunger. (9). Winter is approaching; with limited space to shelter safely, Gazans are exposed to the risks of hypothermia and more severe health conditions. The mental health of Gazans has long shown devastating trends, especially among children (10,15). The longer the conflict continues, the more severe these impacts will become.

The health system of Gaza has been massively degraded; only 9 of 36 hospitals are partially functioning (3). The number of hospital beds has plummeted from 3500 to 1500 – nowhere near the estimated need of 5000 (3). Bed occupancy rates are at 200–300% in the main receiving hospitals and 71% of primary healthcare facilities are non-functional. There is dramatic reduction in access to essential health services including emergency obstetric and neonatal care, and treatment of noncommunicable diseases.

As of 21 December 2023, there has been nearly 250 attacks on health facilities and over 300 health workers killed (11), including a key member of the WHO trauma and emergency team, along with her husband, her 6-month-old son, and over 50 family members sheltering in the same house. The toll among humanitarian staff has become unbearable. The current Gaza crisis has been the deadliest for the United Nations, with at least 136 UNRWA staff killed (12).

Gaza cannot afford to lose any more hospitals, hospital beds, or primary healthcare centres. The health system must be protected from further deteriorations to reverse this downward trend and strengthen capacities to meet the soaring needs.

WHO pays tribute to health workers in Gaza who are working heroically under unimaginable conditions. We are working with other United Nations agencies and non-government partners, especially UNRWA and the Palestine Red Crescent Society, to provide and protect health services.

Guided by a comprehensive operational plan (13), WHO is supporting health care services by providing medicines and fuel; leading multiple high-risk, interagency missions to transfer critically ill patients to southern Gaza; and supporting the deployment of emergency medical teams. We are partnering with UNRWA to strengthen disease surveillance, coordinating with health cluster partners to expand primary care services, pursuing options to increase hospital bed capacity, assisting with patient referrals to Egypt, and advocating in the region and globally.

However, the worsening insecurity, grossly insufficient aid flows and increasing desperation among Gazans are placing all humanitarian operations at grave risk. WHO and the United Nations as a whole are committed to stay and deliver for the people of Gaza. Our ability to do so will, however, depend entirely on how security evolves. WHO deeply regrets the failure of the United Nations Security Council to pass a resolution on a ceasefire on December 10.

Tensions and insecurity are also escalating in the occupied West Bank. Over 290 Palestinians have been killed recently by Israeli forces or settlers – 30% of them children (14). Increased use of live ammunition, airstrikes, obstructions at checkpoints, and closure of several communities have prevented entry or exit for patients, health care providers and ambulances on multiple occasions (16).

Health is a human right. More advocacy is needed to secure a ceasefire. This is the only way we can secure unhindered and sustained humanitarian access and ensure the protection of human rights for Gazans and all Palestinians. WHO calls on all those with influence to achieve a permanent ceasefire now. To allow unhindered and sustained humanitarian access to the civilian population of Gaza. To protect the healthcare system from further degradation and attacks. To release the remaining hostages and to ensure that their rights are observed while in detention. And to work towards lasting peace and justice.

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