22 March 2024, Cairo, Egypt – I recently visited Al-Arish Governorate and the Rafah border crossing point in Egypt, where I met with the Deputy Governor of North Sinai Major General El-Ghandoor, senior officials from the Egyptian Red Crescent (ERC) and Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS), and other health partners working on the health response to the Gaza crisis.

Since the escalation of hostilities in the occupied Palestinian territory, Egypt has been playing a key role in facilitating the delivery of aid into Gaza through the Rafah border crossing and providing free medical care and treatment for evacuated patients.

In Rafah, I saw aid trucks loaded and ready to cross the border into Gaza. I was told by ERC colleagues that 1500 of their trucks are ready to cross and an additional 1000 trucks are ready for inspection. However, they also described the long and complicated inspection process and ambiguous rejection criteria set by Israeli authorities that continues to impede the flow of aid into Gaza.

I visited the ERC warehouse set up specifically for humanitarian aid received from Egypt and 43 countries for the Gaza crisis response. These valuable donations that range from basic items like water purification vessels and disinfectants, to sophisticated medical equipment like neonatal incubators can help alleviate the suffering of Gazans from malnutrition, disease outbreaks and a significant of lack of clean water. Sadly, though, I was astonished to see large amounts of rejected items despite the dire need.

As Gaza’s health system faces severe shortages and patients lose access to life-saving medical treatment and care, Egypt has also scaled up the capacity of 83 hospitals in 17 governorates across the country, including in North Sinai to receive medically evacuated patients from Gaza.

At El-Arish General Hospital, where 85 patients from Gaza are currently admitted, I met many men, women, and children with significant injuries ranging from broken bones to explosion injuries and head trauma. I met an 18-year-old girl who waited three months for treatment for her broken leg, and a young mother with twin boys born in Gaza during the war, one of whom is now awaiting urgent heart surgery in Egypt. I met a lady and her daughter, both suffering from severe trauma injuries; she told me that she lost both her husband and brother and is praying for the recovery of her younger son who is currently in intensive care with skull injuries.

I met elderly people suffering from chronic diseases that were unable to access treatment for many weeks before being evacuated and are now suffering from the consequences of untreated diabetes and hypertension. I met with at least five patients with different types of cancer who lacked proper care and follow-up for weeks as they waited at the border to cross over into Egypt.

The dedicated Egyptian health staff caring for the patients told me that about 65% of admissions from Gaza were women and children, and that – while most cases to date have been related to traumatic injuries - the number of patients with chronic diseases referred to Egyptian facilities was steadily increasing.

Since October 7, 2023, WHO has been helping Egypt bolster its health system's capacity to accommodate medical evacuees while maintaining health care access for Egyptians. WHO has supplied medicines and medical supplies worth more than $US 1 million to expand referral hospitals' capacities in five governorates, including North Sinai, Ismailia, Port Said, Suez, and Cairo. These supplies include trauma kits, orthopedic supplies, blood supplies, anesthesia drugs, medical equipment, and hygiene kits.

WHO has trained almost 300 Egyptian health workers in different specialties, including management of emergency cases and national blood transfusion standards. An additional 200 health volunteers with the Egyptian Red Crescent have been trained to help scale up community-based health services for evacuees and their families.

WHO is also working with the national health authorities, the Egyptian Red Crescent, and partners to scale up mental health and psychological support services for medical evacuees who also bear the mental scars of the trauma they have endured.

The support provided by Egypt and health partners shows the vital solidarity and cooperation that is needed now, more than ever. WHO remains committed at all levels to supporting Egypt. But thousands of critically ill patients inside Gaza still need medical evacuation. Ensuring their safe transfers into and potentially through Egypt is crucial.

As extreme hunger and disease spread across Gaza, I reiterate WHO's calls for all parties to ensure unimpeded and sustained access of aid into and across the Strip. Ultimately, a ceasefire and efforts to achieve lasting peace are the only solutions that can bring an end to the suffering that Gazans have endured for too long.

Selected photos from the mission

WHO Regional Director Dr Hanan Balkhy at the Rafah border-crossing in Egypt

WHO Regional Director Dr Hanan Balkhy with children evacuated from Gaza being treated at Al-Arish Hospital in Egypt

WHO Regional Director Dr Hanan Balkhy visited the Egyptian Red Crescent warehouse at Al-Arish, Egypt.

WHO Regional Director Dr Hanan Balkhy visited the Egyptian Red Crescent warehouse at Al-Arish, Egypt.

More photos

Sunday 7th of July 2024 05:19:50 AM