12 December 2023 – Cairo, Geneva, Jerusalem, WHO reiterates its call for the protection of health care and humanitarian assistance in Gaza, following military checkpoint delays and detention of health partners during a mission to transfer critically-ill patients and deliver supplies to a hospital in northern Gaza. During the mission, a patient reportedly died.

On 9 December 2023, a WHO team, in collaboration with the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and with support from the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), completed a high-risk mission to Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza City to deliver medical supplies, assess the situation in the hospital, and transfer critically-injured patients to a hospital in the south. The mission delivered trauma and surgical supplies, enough to treat 1500 patients, to the hospital, and transferred 19 critical patients with 14 companions to Nasser Medical Complex in south Gaza, where they can receive a higher level of care.

On the way north, the UN convoy was inspected at the Wadi Gaza checkpoint, and ambulance crew members had to leave the vehicles for identification. Two PRCS staff were detained for over an hour, further delaying the mission. WHO staff saw one of them being made to kneel at gunpoint and then taken out of sight, where he was reportedly harassed, beaten, stripped and searched.

As the mission entered Gaza City, the aid truck carrying the medical supplies and one of the ambulances were hit by bullets.

On the way back towards southern Gaza, with the patients from Al-Ahli Hospital on board, the convoy was again stopped at the Wadi Gaza checkpoint, where PRCS staff and most of the patients had to leave the ambulances for security checks. Critical patients remaining in the ambulances were searched by armed soldiers.

One of the same two PRCS staff temporarily detained earlier on the way in was taken for interrogation a second time. The mission made numerous attempts to coordinate his release, but eventually—after more than two and a half hours—had to make the difficult decision to leave the highly dangerous area and proceed, for the safety and wellbeing of the patients and humanitarian workers. (Three ambulances carrying extremely critical patients had already continued onwards earlier, while three remained with the convoy.) PRCS reported afterwards that during the transfer process, one of the injured patients died, as a result of his untreated wounds.

The PRCS staff member was released later that night after joint UN efforts. Yesterday, the WHO team met him, as well as his father, supervisor, and colleagues. He said he was harassed, beaten, threatened, stripped of his clothes, and blindfolded. His hands were tied behind his back and he was treated in a degrading and humiliating manner. Once released, he

was left to walk towards the south with his hands still tied behind his back, and without clothes or shoes.

Detentions have happened previously during humanitarian missions in Gaza.

On 22 November, six people from the Ministry of Health and PRCS were detained during a WHO-led mission to move patients from Al-Shifa Hospital. Four people–three from the Ministry of Health and one PRCS staff—are still in detention, more than three weeks later. There is no information on their wellbeing or whereabouts. This is unacceptable. WHO, along with their family, colleagues and loved ones, is deeply concerned about their wellbeing. We reiterate our call for their legal and human rights to be respected.

Obstructing ambulances and attacks on humanitarian and health workers are unconscionable. Healthcare, including ambulances, are protected under international law. They must be respected and protected in all circumstances.

The difficulties faced by this mission illustrate the shrinking space for humanitarian actors to provide aid within Gaza, even though access is desperately needed to alleviate the catastrophic humanitarian situation, as called for in the resolution adopted by the WHO Executive Board members on 10 December.

WHO and partners remain firmly committed to staying in Gaza and assisting the population. But as hostilities increase across Gaza, and aid falls short of needs, the humanitarian support system is on the verge of falling apart.

The only viable solution is a sustained ceasefire, so WHO and partners can work safely and unhindered to strengthen a deteriorating health system, replenish critical supplies of fuel, medicines, and other essential aid, and prevent disease, hunger, and further suffering in the Gaza Strip.

Note to editors on Al-Ahli Hospital

During the above mission to the heavily destroyed Gaza City, WHO staff saw hundreds of

people, including women, elderly people, youth, and children, who seemed surprised to see aid workers in the area given the highly volatile situation and insecurity.

WHO staff described Al-Ahli Hospital as in a state of “utter chaos and a humanitarian disaster zone.” It is extremely congested with many displaced people and over 200 patients, while it only has enough resources to support 40 beds – half of its original bed capacity. The building has sustained substantial damage because of the hostilities.

Doctors said the situation is “beyond control” as they face shortages of fuel, oxygen, and essential medical supplies, as well as a lack of food and water for patients and themselves. Health staff capacity is minimal, nursing care is extremely limited, and the hospital is relying heavily on volunteers.

Faced with vast numbers of trauma patients inside the hospital, and outside on the street, doctors are forced to prioritize who receives care and who does not. They are treating many serious cases in the hospital’s corridors, on the floor, in the hospital chapel, and even in the street. The hospital is severely short-staffed, and it is lacking the ability to perform vascular operations. Limb amputations are decided as the last resort to save lives.

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