19 November 2023, Geneva/Cairo – A second WHO-led joint UN mission, working in collaboration with the Palestine Red Crescent Society, earlier today evacuated 31 babies from Al-Shifa Hospital in northern Gaza, to a hospital in southern Gaza. The severely ill babies were transported in 6 ambulances supplied and staffed by the Palestine Red Crescent. Other mission members included UN Mine Action, UNICEF and UNRWA. The mission was once again assessed as high-risk, due to the active combat taking place in close proximity to the hospital.

These premature and low birthweight babies had earlier been moved from the neonatal unit in Al-Shifa to a safer area in the hospital, due to lack of electricity to run their life support, and security risks in the hospital. Yesterday and last night, two babies died before the evacuation could take place. (Note, there were 33 babies under care yesterday, according to a Ministry of Health update.)

The babies were successfully transported to the neonatal intensive care unit at Al-Helal Al-Emarati Maternity Hospital in southern Gaza, where they are being assessed and stabilized. Doctors there say all the babies are fighting serious infections due to lack of medical supplies and impossibility to continue infection control measures in Al-Shifa Hospital. Eleven are in critical condition.

Sadly, none of the infants were accompanied by family members, as the Ministry of Health has only limited information, and is not currently able to find close family members. Six health workers and 10 of their family members, who had been sheltering at the hospital, were also evacuated.

The evacuation, which was requested by health workers and patients during the joint mission yesterday, became necessary as Al-Shifa Hospital is no longer able to function due to a lack of clean water, fuel, medical supplies, food, other essential items and the intense hostilities. WHO remains deeply concerned about the safety and health needs of patients and health workers who remain at Al-Shifa Hospital, and in the few partially functional hospitals in the north that face imminent closure.

Al-Shifa Hospital, previously the largest and most advanced referral hospital in Gaza, together with other hospitals, must be fully restored to provide urgently needed health services in Gaza.

Today’s mission was led by senior WHO staff, including a medical specialist and a doctor, and representatives from UNICEF, UNMAS and UNRWA as noted above. It included medical staff from the Palestine Red Crescent Society, along with their ambulances. WHO is grateful for their partnership, and the support of the rest of the UN, working together as One UN.

The complex and high-risk operation, occurring in an active conflict zone, follows an assessment mission yesterday, 18 November, which included public health experts, logistics specialists, and security staff from OCHA, UNDSS, UNMAS/UNOPS, UNRWA and WHO. Today’s mission was deconflicted with the Israel Defense Forces and with the defacto authorities.

There remain over 250 patients and 20 health workers at Al-Shifa, who all request immediate evacuation. Planning is on-going to evacuate the remaining patients, their families and the health care workers. Given the complex security and logistics constraints, these evacuations will take several days to complete. Priority will be given to the 22 dialysis patients and 50 patients with spinal injuries. WHO reaffirms its respect for the dedication, professionalism, humanity and courage of the health staff who have continued to care for their patients under unimaginably difficult conditions.

WHO reiterates its plea for collective efforts to bring an end to the hostilities and humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. We call for an immediate ceasefire, the sustained flow of humanitarian assistance at scale, unhindered humanitarian access to all of those in need, the unconditional release of all hostages—many of whom have serious medical needs—and the cessation of attacks on health care and other vital infrastructure.

See statement issued by WHO yesterday for additional information on the dire situation at Al-Shifa

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