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Editorial

The Tragic Collapse of Gaza's Health System

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ABSTRACT

This editorial addresses the tragic collapse of Gaza's health system resulting from the recent conflict between Israel and Palestine. The deliberate targeting of healthcare facilities, atrocities committed by the Israeli army, and the dire humanitarian crisis have led to catastrophic conditions. The toll includes over 20,000 dead, 1.9 million displaced, and countless injuries, with healthcare facilities operating beyond capacity. The health system's collapse necessitates patient transfer to other countries. International law violations are noted, especially the deliberate targeting of health facilities. The editorial emphasizes the urgent need for the international community's intervention, calling for an immediate ceasefire, protection of health workers, and accountability for potential war crimes. The ultimate goal is to uphold human rights, protect civilians, and rebuild Gaza's health infrastructure for lasting stability.

Keywords: Gaza, health system collapse, humanitarian crisis, war crimes, international intervention, ceasefire, accountability, human rights, global peace

1. UNRAVELING TRAGEDY: FROM BALFOUR TO GAZA'S HEALTH SYSTEM COLLAPSE

On October 7, 2023, a group of Palestinian resistance fighters launched an attack on the occupied territories from the Gazan side, sparking a new conflict between Israel and Palestine. The atrocities perpetrated by Israel's army in the Seized Gaza Strip created an unprecedented global health and humanitarian crisis.

The health crisis in Gaza has reached catastrophic levels, as confirmed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and Palestinian officials. The situation is tragic, with hospitals under bombardment, besieged, or raided by the Israeli army. The latest WHO session on December 10, 2023, highlighted the impossibility of improving the health conditions in Gaza, describing the health system as "on its knees and collapsing"¹.

As the crisis in Gaza deepens, the latest reports from the World Health Organization (WHO) underscore a dire situation verging on the unthinkable. Hospitals that are meant to be healing sanctuaries have become destruction targets. The health system in Gaza is in a state of collapse, and the consequences are devastating the lives of the people who call this troubled community home.

2. THE HUMAN TOLL: A STAGGERING LOSS OF LIVES

The human toll is staggering. With more than 20,000 dead and 1.9 million displaced after ten weeks of relentless Israeli attacks, the numbers alone cannot capture the profound tragedy unfolding in Gaza². Every hour brings an alarming tally of casualties on the Palestinian side, with an average of 15 people killed, including six children, and 35 others injured, further exacerbated by the dropping of 42 bombs per hour by Israel, as highlighted by its army³.

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According to Al Jazeera, as of December 24, in the ongoing conflict, Israel has continued its attacks in the Gaza Strip, including areas near hospitals and intensifying ground operations. The reported casualty figures are as follows: at least 20,424 people were killed, including 8,200 children and 6,200 women; more than 54,036 people injured, including 8,663 children and 6,327 women; and more than 7,000 people missing³.

The collapse of health and sanitary systems in the Gaza Strip has necessitated the transfer of injured and wounded individuals to hospitals outside the region. This critical situation has prompted the evacuation of patients to medical facilities in countries such as Qatar, Tunisia, Egypt, and others. The dire state of Gaza's health infrastructure, combined with the escalating humanitarian crisis, has compelled the international community to intervene, ensuring that those in need receive medical care beyond the region's disabled healthcare system.

3. THE ASSAULT ON HEALTHCARE FACILITIES: A VIOLATION OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

Underpinning this tragedy is the deliberate targeting of healthcare facilities by the Israeli army. The people of Gaza, already enduring a 16-year blockade, now face the destruction of their homes and communities. The WHO Director-General reported an alarming number of attacks on healthcare in Gaza, with health workers directly in the firing line⁴. Since October 7, 2023, the WHO has verified more than 449 attacks on healthcare in Gaza⁴.

Under international law, healthcare workers and facilities should be protected during conflicts, yet attacks on them by Israel's Army persist¹. Such assaults are a blatant violation of international law, which mandates the protection of healthcare facilities during conflicts⁵.

Demands for action following assaults on hospitals have become routine⁶. WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus emphasized the critical need to protect the health system in Gaza, expressing concern about prolonged checks and detention of health workers jeopardizing the lives of vulnerable patients. He underscored the right of the people in Gaza to access healthcare, asserting that even in times of war, the health system must be safeguarded⁷.

After ten weeks of devastating attacks, the situation is beyond catastrophic, and Gaza's health system is on the brink of collapse. Hospitals are operating far beyond their capacity, providing shelter to thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs). According to the latest WHO briefing on the health situation in Gaza, hospitals are operating three times their bed capacity in the southern region, reaching occupancy rates of 206% in inpatient departments and a staggering 250% in Intensive Care Units⁸. The northern part of Gaza is now without a functional hospital, and medical facilities are running out of fuel, staff, and supplies⁹. Furthermore, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as of the 12th of December, 2023, at least 300 health workers have been killed so far¹⁰.

4. BEYOND THE NUMBERS: HUMANITARIAN CRISIS UNFOLDING

Behind these numbers lies a profound humanitarian crisis. Due to the blockade and medical supply shortages, procedures are being conducted without anesthesia, reflecting the desperate state of the health system. The WHO reports soaring rates of infectious diseases, including diarrhea, upper respiratory infections, meningitis, and more¹¹. Malnutrition is on the rise, posing severe risks, especially for children and breastfeeding mothers. The mental health of the population is deteriorating rapidly due to the lack of sanitation, collapsing health services, and overall living conditions. The current situation, with only one shower for every 4,500 people and one toilet for every 220, is a breeding ground for infectious diseases¹¹.

According to Farge's report, the United Nations Agency describes Gaza's situation as 'beyond catastrophic,' with patients begging for food and water. Also, there is widespread malnutrition leading to life-threatening conditions, especially among children and breastfeeding mothers^{11,12}. Finally, the World Health Organization reports that mental health problems are becoming more prevalent in Palestinian society¹.

War crimes and atrocities committed by the Israeli army have led to overcrowded conditions, coupled with a lack of basic necessities, creating a breeding ground for the spread of diseases in the Gaza Strip.

The humanitarian crisis has reached new depths with the exacerbation caused by the United States' consecutive vetoes against all United Nations resolutions for a permanent ceasefire in the Gaza

Strip. This act of veto further hindered diplomatic efforts to end the hostilities, prolonging the suffering of the affected population. The international community's attempts to address the crisis were impeded, and the humanitarian and sanitary situation deteriorated due to the geopolitical impasse. The use of the veto power in this context added further complexity to the already challenging task of alleviating the dire conditions faced by the Palestinians in the affected region.

5. THE URGENT CALL FOR INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION

In the face of this unfolding tragedy, the international community cannot turn a blind eye and remain silent about this humanitarian disaster. The people of Gaza have the right to live and access healthcare, and the health system must be protected even in times of war. Immediate and coordinated action is needed to halt the loss of lives.

Thus, an immediate ceasefire is imperative to prevent further loss of life, facilitate the evacuation of the injured, and create conditions for the provision of essential medical services. Also, the global community must act swiftly to stop Israel's attacks on civilians and healthcare facilities, ensuring the protection of health workers and the overall health system. International law should be applied to Israeli state officials if crimes and atrocities committed in Gaza against innocent civilians, healthcare workers, and institutions are proven.

The application of international law is imperative when addressing potential crimes and atrocities committed by Israeli state officials in Gaza. Invoking and applying international legal mechanisms becomes essential if evidence substantiates wrongdoings, particularly against innocent civilians, healthcare workers, or institutions. Upholding international law in such cases is crucial for justice, human rights, and the prevention of impunity, fostering a global commitment to protecting civilian populations and safeguarding the principles of humanitarian law.

Furthermore, the U.S. and other countries need to play a constructive role in promoting peace, justice, and the protection of human rights globally. This approach aligns with international efforts to address humanitarian crises and foster diplomatic solutions, emphasizing the importance of collective responsibility in pursuing a just and lasting resolution.

Finally, despite the challenges, immediate access for humanitarian actors is crucial to providing aid to Gaza. Obstacles hindering the delivery of health supplies must be removed. Post-conflict efforts should focus on the comprehensive reconstruction of Gaza's health infrastructure, including rebuilding damaged facilities and replenishing medical supplies. In the pursuit of global peace, it becomes imperative to address and hold accountable those responsible for war crimes. This commitment reflects a shared responsibility to uphold human rights, protect civilians, and build a foundation for lasting peace and stability worldwide.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

While preparing this work, the authors used ChatGPT to improve readability and language. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed. The authors takes full responsibility for the publication's content.

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