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Written statement submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status*

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* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Systematic Attacks on Gaza's Healthcare System

1. Introduction

Since October 7, 2023, Israel's escalated genocide against Gaza has included systematic attacks on the health sector, causing widespread destruction to hospitals and clinics. These actions have severely degraded the healthcare system's ability to provide essential services, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of medical personnel and depriving thousands of patients and injured individuals of necessary care.

This deliberate targeting constitutes a dual crime against humanity, reflecting blatant disregard for international humanitarian law, which protects medical facilities and personnel. This report outlines the severe violations inflicted on Gaza's healthcare system, including infrastructure destruction, attacks on medical staff, and the subsequent humanitarian crisis.

2. Systematic Targeting of Gaza's Healthcare Sector

Healthcare Infrastructure Destruction:

From the onset of the October 2023 assault, Israel's military explicitly targeted health facilities. On October 14, 2023, orders were issued to evacuate 22 hospitals in northern Gaza. That same day, an airstrike hit the cancer diagnostic centre at Al-Ahli Hospital, injuring four staff members. Threats and subsequent airstrikes forced many hospitals to cease operations. For instance, Kamal Adwan Hospital was bombed and set on fire, forcing mass evacuations.

By October 2024, 65% of healthcare facilities, including governmental, private, and UNRWA institutions, were destroyed or rendered non-operational. Remaining facilities operate at 300% capacity, with intensive care units overwhelmed. Ambulances were not spared, with 139 targeted, crippling emergency response capabilities. [1]

Statistics on Damaged Infrastructure:

- Fully destroyed hospitals: 34
- Damaged health centers: 80
- Ambulances targeted: 139
- Partially operational hospitals: 17

Forcible Displacement Through Healthcare System Collapse:

The destruction of healthcare facilities has exacerbated forced displacement, particularly in northern Gaza. This deliberate strategy aims to create a long-term humanitarian crisis, leaving hundreds of thousands of injured and chronically ill individuals without adequate care. By 2024, this displacement included doctors and their families, many of whom fled repeated bombings. [3]

3. Attacks on Medical Personnel

Medical professionals have faced direct, deliberate attacks, violating international laws that prohibit targeting healthcare workers. These violations include killings, arrests, and enforced disappearances.

Documented Attacks on Medical Personnel (October 2023 - July 2024):

- Medical professionals killed: 1,068
- Arrested or forcibly disappeared: 331
- Executed in detention: 3

Among those killed were 146 doctors from various specialties. These include rare specialists deliberately targeted to cripple Gaza's healthcare system. For example, Dr. Saed Drabieh, a renowned pediatric surgeon, was killed alongside his family when his home was bombed. Similarly, Dr. Omar Farwana, a cardiologist, and his daughter, Dr. Ayah Farwana, were assassinated in a targeted airstrike.

Additional atrocities include the arrest and torture of Dr. Iyad Rantisi, head of obstetrics at Kamal Adwan Hospital, who was detained while evacuating patients. He died six days later under severe torture. Reports also detail instances of sexual violence, such as the assault and subsequent killing of Dr. Adnan Al-Barsh, a prominent orthopedic surgeon. [4]

Impact on Specialized Care:

These losses have caused irreparable damage to specialized healthcare in Gaza. For example, the assassination of Dr. Ziad Al-Dalou, a gastroenterologist, left the Shifa Hospital without a lead in its gastroenterology department. Additionally, rare specialists in oncology and nephrology, essential for managing chronic diseases, have been systematically targeted, disrupting lifesaving treatments. [5]

4. Case Studies of Detained Doctors

Numerous Palestinian medical professionals have been detained by Israeli forces since October 7, 2023, severely impacting Gaza's healthcare system. Dr. Hussam Abu Safia, director of Kamal Adwan Hospital, was detained on December 28, 2024, during a raid on the hospital. Israeli forces accused the hospital of harboring operatives, a claim widely criticized for its lack of evidence. Dr. Abu Safia's detention caused widespread fear among medical staff in northern Gaza.

Dr. Adnan Al-Bursh, head of orthopedics at Al-Shifa Hospital, was arrested on December 5, 2023, during a raid at Al-Awda Hospital. He was detained without charge and reportedly tortured, dying in Israeli custody on April 19, 2024. His death drew international condemnation, with calls for an independent investigation.

Dr. Ziad Al-Dalou, an internal medicine specialist, became the third doctor confirmed to have died in Israeli detention. The circumstances of his death remain unclear, raising concerns over the treatment of detainees. Similarly, Dr. Iyad Rantisi, head of obstetrics at Kamal Adwan Hospital, was detained while evacuating patients. Reports indicate he was tortured and died six days later in Israeli custody.

Other notable cases include Dr. Saed Drabieh and Dr. Omar Farwana, both of whom were killed along with their families in targeted airstrikes. Dr. Farwana's daughter, Dr. Ayah Farwana, a young medical professional, also perished in the attack. The loss of these doctors has left critical gaps in Gaza's healthcare infrastructure.

Israeli forces have detained over 310 Palestinian healthcare workers since October 2023, many of whom have faced mistreatment, including physical and psychological abuse. These actions constitute severe violations of international humanitarian law, further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. [6]

5. Humanitarian Impact of Healthcare Collapse

The collapse of Gaza's healthcare system has catastrophic consequences:

- **Severe Shortages in Resources:** With 2.1 million residents, Gaza's healthcare capacity is reduced to 1,822 hospital beds, translating to 0.087 beds per 1,000 people. This shortage has forced many patients to receive care in hallways and makeshift clinics.
- **Inaccessible Specialized Care:** Critical facilities, such as cardiac catheterization and dialysis centers, have been destroyed, endangering the lives of patients with chronic illnesses. Cancer treatment, dialysis, and intensive care for neonates are now unavailable in large parts of Gaza.
- **Overburdened Medical Teams:** Remaining medical personnel are working under extreme stress in overcrowded, unsafe conditions. Many live in fear for their lives, with hospitals no longer considered safe zones.
- **Long-Term Health Implications:** The systematic targeting of rare specialists has left Gaza without adequate expertise to manage complex cases, such as advanced cancers and cardiovascular diseases. [2]

6. Recommendations

- i. **International Action:** The international community must enforce protections for Gaza's healthcare sector, including ensuring safe access to medical supplies and staff.
- ii. **Legal Accountability:** Perpetrators of attacks on healthcare facilities and personnel must face international legal consequences. Investigations must prioritize cases like those of Dr. Adnan Al-Bursh and Dr. Iyad Rantisi.
- iii. **Humanitarian Support:** Immediate and sustained aid is essential to rebuild Gaza's healthcare infrastructure and provide medical supplies. Restoring key facilities like Kamal Adwan and Al-Ahli hospitals is critical.
- iv. **Advocacy and Awareness:** Global campaigns should raise awareness about the humanitarian crisis and pressure Israel to cease targeting medical infrastructure.
- v. **Systematic Documentation:** Independent investigations should document violations against healthcare facilities and personnel to support accountability and justice.
- vi. **Support for Medical Personnel:** Provide psychological and professional support to surviving medical staff, including relocation and retraining where necessary.
- vii. **Medical Boycott of Israel:** The international medical community should impose a medical boycott on Israel for systematically targeting Gaza's healthcare sector. This includes halting collaborations, resource exchanges, and conferences to pressure accountability and adherence to humanitarian laws.

7. Conclusion

The deliberate targeting of Gaza's healthcare system is part of a systematic strategy to create enduring humanitarian suffering. Immediate international intervention is crucial to halt further violations, rebuild Gaza's healthcare infrastructure, and ensure accountability for crimes committed. The resilience of Gaza's medical community, despite immense loss, underscores the urgent need for global solidarity and action.

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4. "Press Release: New Study Shows Israel's Assault on Gaza's Health Infrastructure Was Not Random," Harvard FXB Center, April 9, 2024, <https://fxb.harvard.edu/2024/04/09/press-release-new-study-of-satellite-data-shows-israels-assault-on-hospitals-schools-and-water-infrastructure-in-the-gaza-strip-was-not-random/>.
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6. "Israel: Torture of Palestinian Healthcare Workers," Human Rights Watch, August 26, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2024/08/26/israel-palestinian-healthcare-workers-tortured>.