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Health conditions of, and assistance to, the Arab population in the occupied Arab territories, including Palestine

At the request of the Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations and Other International Organizations at Geneva, the Director-General has the honour to transmit the attached report to the Fifty-seventh World Health Assembly.

ANNEX

Ministry of Health

**HEALTH CONDITIONS OF, AND ASSISTANCE TO, THE ARAB POPULATION
IN THE OCCUPIED ARAB TERRITORIES, INCLUDING PALESTINE**

Report presented to the Fifty-seventh World Health Assembly, Geneva

May 2004

INTRODUCTION

1. The Israeli occupation forces have continued their repressive measures and brutal practices against the Palestinian people, and persisted in violating the rights of Palestinian citizens throughout the 1293 days between 28 September 2000 and the preparation of this report. Excessive and disproportionate force, such as heavy combat weapons, F-16 aircraft, combat helicopters, and heavy artillery and machine guns have been used. The Israelis have exceeded all bounds in their aggression against the Palestine health sector, and have continued their attacks against the lives, security and freedom of movement of members of Palestinian medical personnel working in the occupied Palestinian territories. Israeli soldiers have used live ammunition, tear gas and even artillery shells against medical teams and ambulances, not to mention storming some hospitals and medical centres.

2. The Israeli occupation forces continued to impose curfews on Palestinian towns and villages for one third of each year. More than any other city Hebron has been under curfew for 5828 out of 9965 hours, in other words for 58.5% of the period; the corresponding figures in Nablus, and in Tulkarem were 41.6% and 39.6% respectively.

MARTYRS AND CASUALTIES

3. The emergency departments in Palestinian hospitals have records of 49 351 persons wounded, and 3415 martyrs aged from 15 to 45 years, i.e. 75.8% of the total number of casualties. Children under 18 years of age accounted for 22.2% of all martyrs.

TARGETING INFANTS, AND KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN

4. In one year, 17 infants under one year of age have fallen victim to Israeli aggression in the West Bank and Gaza. A total of 67 children have been wounded. Fifty-eight children under six years of age (kindergarten and nursery children) have been killed since the beginning of the intifada; 32.8% of them died as a result of ambulances carrying them being stopped at Israeli military checkpoints and road blocks and prevented from getting to hospital; 24.1% of them died from bullets being shot at them, and 37.6% suffered multiple body injuries.

5. The killing of children is a flagrant violation of the United Nations Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in times of Emergency and Armed Conflict (1974), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959). Such acts constitute flagrant violations of the fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (1949). Israel is also responsible for the killing and wounding of children and other civilians through the explosion of mines, ammunition and suspicious objects left behind by its army, in violation of the Protocol on Prohibition or Restrictions on the Use of Mines, Booby-Traps and Other Devices (10 October 1980).

TARGETING OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

6. The educational community has lost 452 male and female students under 18 years of age; this is equivalent to 20 school classes, and almost an entire school. Some 3018 other schoolchildren have been injured, hundreds being maimed and disabled; 195 university students have fallen as martyrs and

1245 others have been wounded. Twenty-seven teachers, three university personnel and seven administrative staff have been shot dead.

THE POLICY OF ASSASSINATIONS AND PHYSICAL LIQUIDATION

7. Four hundred and fifty-one Palestinians have either been assassinated or deliberately and extrajudicially killed through the use of various weapons, including missiles fired by Apache helicopters and F-16 aircraft at residential buildings and cars used by civilians. Extrajudicial executions (assassination and premeditated murder) are violations of international humanitarian law and of Article 147 of the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (1949), whereby extrajudicial murder is considered a grave breach of the Convention. Grave violations of this Convention are also considered as war crimes according to the statutes of the International Criminal Court (1998).

DEMOLITION OF BUILDINGS AND HOMES

8. Israeli aggression against residential premises and neighbourhoods, as well as other civilian property, is a blatant violation of international human rights conventions. Article 53 of the fourth Geneva Convention (1949) provides as follows:

“Any destruction by the Occupying Power of real or personal property belonging individually or collectively to private persons, or to the State, or to other public authorities, or to social or cooperative organizations, is prohibited, except where such destruction is rendered absolutely necessary by military operations.”

Article 147 of the same Convention also prohibits any “destruction and appropriation of property not justified by military necessity”. Such breaches are considered grave violations of the Convention.

9. The policy of house demolitions is but one of the excessively cruel Israeli policies. The occupying forces continue to destroy private property in various parts of the Palestinian territories, and have damaged no less than 60 781 residential units and public and private establishments (70% of which are in the West Bank governorates, and 30% in the Gaza Strip). In the West Bank 21.5% of damaged buildings were in the Jenin and 18.8% in the Bethlehem governorates. In the Gaza Strip, 39.1% of all damaged buildings were in the Rafah governorate; 19.6% of these houses were totally destroyed. As a result of Israeli policies, 16 000 Palestinians have completely lost their homes and are now homeless.

10. The number of buildings totally destroyed is 4867; those partially damaged stand at 55 344, and the number of damaged buildings is 158. The number of security force buildings and establishments damaged stands at 412.

ISRAELI DETENTION POLICY

11. The Israeli occupation forces continue to detain thousands of Palestinian citizens on an almost daily basis. Israeli prison authorities sometimes attack detainees and beat them and use tear gas on them, resulting in injuries to some of the detainees. Some Israeli prisons and detention centres lack the appropriate health facilities. Most prisons are not clean. Space is confined, and they are infested with

mice and cockroaches. Prison administrations often fail to provide the medical treatment required by detainees in view of their condition or in accordance with doctors' prescriptions. The prison authorities prevent physicians from outside the prisons from examining patients or following up their treatment, despite the lack of resident doctors and even trained nurses. The Israeli authorities detain thousands of Palestinians in prisons and detention centres outside the borders of the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967, in violation of Article 76 of the fourth Geneva Convention which provides for the detention of protected persons in the occupied country, where they have to serve their sentences if convicted.

THE SEPARATION WALL

12. The most salient feature of the current year of the intifada is the Israeli Government's project to build a separation wall on occupied Palestinian land. Some 165 kilometres of this wall have already been completed in a very short period. Sixteen villages have been completely isolated, and another 50 separated and isolated from their farmland. Statistics show the enormous consequences of building this separation wall; some 583 660 people (97 000 families) or 16% of the population, live in this area (all along the planned 650 kilometre length of the wall). Nineteen thousand two hundred and sixty people among the population affected are elderly and 250 000 are children under 15 years of age, 105 642 of these children are under five. Chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, heart and kidney diseases and cancer affect 23 346 patients and some 11 000 people in this area are disabled. Most of these people need the diagnostic and rehabilitation services located on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip on the other side of the racial separation wall. Some 170 000 students in 320 schools will be on the wrong side of the wall, meaning they will be deprived of school health-care services.

13. Such measures will also affect the reproductive health programmes for Palestinian women, especially during pregnancy and the postnatal period. Reports indicate that more than 2500 pregnant women suffer from complications or are classified as risky pregnancies requiring care and treatment in specialized medical centres in cities outside the racial Separation Wall.

THE ECONOMIC SITUATION

14. The economic dependency ratio (i.e. the number of persons under 15 or over 65 years of age divided by the number of those who are between 15 and 65 years of age) in the occupied Palestinian territories stood at 6.0 in 2003, an increase of 25.0% over the year 2000. The rate of unemployment rose to 30.9% of the workforce on the basis of the broad definition of unemployment. More than one-half of Palestinian families lost 50% of their regular income in 2003.

15. World Bank estimates show that the rate of poverty (daily income below US\$ 2 per person) has doubled since 1998 and reached 64.9%. Per capita income has decreased owing to the increase in the rate of unemployment, and to Israel's freezing of taxes and duties (owed to the Palestinian authority).

16. The Israeli occupation forces have removed agricultural soil and destroyed citrus trees, olive trees and agricultural greenhouses, as well as depleting groundwater, causing a decline in the income of workers in the agricultural sector. More than 50% of Palestinian society depends for its food on humanitarian aid from sister and friendly countries and organizations. The economic situation has had severe effects on social conditions in the Palestinian territories, as well as on the physical security of individuals and families alike, in turn, leaving its mark on their mental health and leading to an increase in anxiety, disorders and fear among citizens.

CLOSURE OF INTERNATIONAL BORDERS AND CROSSINGS

17. Closures of international borders and crossing points have led to declining levels of imports from Egypt and Jordan. Access to Israeli ports that constitute the major transit points for Palestinian imports from beyond Israel has been hampered by such measures, with delays in the delivery of goods, medicines, vaccines and medical devices to the occupied Palestinian territories. Restrictions on free movement, combined with military incursions and house demolitions, especially in Rafah and Jenin, have led to the deterioration of living conditions, including reduced access to health facilities, education, food and work. More than 10 000 citizens of Rafah have become homeless.

NUTRITIONAL STATUS

18. Studies in the occupied Palestinian territories continue to show an increase in prevalence of malnutrition among children and pregnant women. A recent study by local and international bodies has brought to light the following facts on malnutrition and anaemia among children under five years of age and women of childbearing age:

- 10.2% suffer from severe malnutrition (wasting)
- 21.5% are underweight
- 44% of children under five years of age suffer from anaemia
- 52.8% of women in the Gaza Strip and 43.9% of those on the West Bank suffer from anaemia
- more than 53% of the population in refugee camps and villages in Palestine suffer from nutrient deficiency; the highest rate has been recorded in Rafah, where 71% of the population suffer from nutrient deficiency
- anaemia in infants (up to nine months of age) has risen to 68.2% (data from health surveys)
- among women of childbearing age 8% suffer from vitamin A and vitamin E deficiencies, 19% from folic acid deficiency, and 12% from calcium deficiency.

19. The deterioration of the health conditions in the Palestinian territories has recently been underlined by UNRWA. The Agency issued a statement saying that it will be compelled to stop its emergency relief operations in the Palestinian territories if donors do not honour their commitments regarding the delivery of emergency assistance.

20. In April 2004, the Israeli Government prevented UNRWA and other international organizations from conveying food aid to the Gaza Strip. Consequently, if Israel continues with this practice, many more Palestinian families will suffer from hunger.

21. Because of the lack of funding for emergency relief provided to Palestinian refugees on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, UNRWA has launched an urgent appeal requesting the international community to provide assistance amounting to US\$ 495 million in order to support urgent programmes to assist 19 camps on the West Bank and eight camps in the Gaza Strip.

MENTAL HEALTH

22. Palestinians are living under severe psychological and social stress owing to the continuous persecution to which they are subjected in the occupied Palestinian territories. This is compounded by the prevalence of psychological shock that has started to affect all aspects of their daily lives, and by a sense of insecurity, especially among children whose instability has been aggravated because they believe that nobody among their families or teachers is able fully to care for or protect them. In such circumstances, it is hard for children to feel secure and calm. Parents and teachers have noticed the prevalence among children of symptoms of shock, ranging from nightmares and bed-wetting to excessive aggressiveness and hyperactivity. Lack of attention and concentration is on the rise among children, and more children are beset by the idea of death and feelings of revenge. The level of care provided to Palestinian children by their families and teachers has also decreased as the latter themselves suffer from pressure and frustration. Many of them are striving to adjust to loss of income and to the high prices of Israeli food. Parents, in general, feel unable adequately to protect and provide for their children. They feel that this will lead to loss of their authority. Teachers meet various challenges deriving from their arduous working conditions, including reductions in salaries, long and danger-fraught journeys to and from schools, and disruption of school life by curfews and closures. Community mental health clinics have recorded a huge rise in new mental health cases (a 38.2% rise in comparison with 2000). Consequently, the Ministry of Health has focused on developing those clinics, improving the skills of their personnel and extending health education among health service providers, in addition to providing medicines for mental patients.

ISRAELI MEASURES AGAINST THE HEALTH SECTOR

23. The aggression perpetrated by the Israeli army, combined with continuous incursions, have led to deterioration of the Palestinian health situation, severe shortage of health supplies, the deterioration of essential health services and of other health programmes, destruction of the health infrastructure, economic instability, and a lack of peace and security. The percentage of patients who cannot access hospitals within one hour's travel has risen from 12% before the intifada to 36% during it. The percentage of patients who are unable to access primary health care facilities within one hour's travel has risen from 3% before the intifada to 12% during it.

24. The closure of checkpoints and the imposition of curfews have led to deaths at Israeli military checkpoints. A total of 106 patients have died at Israeli barriers which are rife throughout the West Bank and Gaza. Israel has divided the Gaza Strip into three isolated areas, and the West Bank into more than 43 isolated pockets.

- 30 members of medical crews have died and 428 have been injured
- there have been 1294 instances of incidents involving ambulances, in which the Israeli occupation troops have meted out abuse and harassed ambulance crews, even sometimes beating them up
- 266 acts of aggression have been committed against ambulances
- more than 38 ambulances have been totally destroyed and more than 123 ambulances have been damaged

- more than 341 acts of aggression have been perpetrated against hospitals in the Palestinian territories
- continuous strife has led to an increase in home deliveries, from 8.2% before the intifada to 14% now
- the number of women benefiting from postnatal care has fallen from 95.6% before the intifada to 82.4%
- 55 pregnant women have given birth at Israeli road blocks, and 33 babies have died during or after birth owing to delays at Israeli checkpoints
- the fetal death rate in Palestinian rural areas has increased by 500% since September 2000.

HOSPITALS

25. Major and routine surgery performed in hospitals has increased by 30.6% with emergency wards in hospitals bearing the brunt of the work. They have admitted and treated 749 318 cases, an increase of 52.6% since 2000. All of this confirms the great burden borne by Palestinian hospitals in providing health and emergency services in response to the deterioration of the Palestinian people's economic conditions, and in coping with the rising number of casualties and martyrs produced by Israeli violence.

26. An important rise has been recorded in blood-transfusion services, from 25 799 blood units in 2000 to 71 735 blood units in 2003, an increase of 178%, and indicates the great burden borne by health institutions in order to help those injured and maimed by the violence of Israeli occupation.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES

27. Although the Ministry of Health has been successful in the controlling and managing of several infectious diseases – no case of diphtheria or poliomyelitis has been recorded since 1982 – the measures implemented by the Israeli occupation have unfortunately taken their toll on the epidemiological surveillance system in Palestine. These measures have weakened case control, registration and reporting. Nevertheless, cases of bacterial meningitis have increased from 9.5 per 100 000 population in 2002 to 13.5 per 100 000 population in 2003. Likewise there has been a rise in viral meningitis, from 22.1 cases per 100 000 population in 2002 to 28.8 per 100 000 in 2003. The demolition of sewerage systems by the passage of Israeli tanks has led to the spread of several infectious and parasitic diseases among the population at large, and among refugees in camps in particular.

28. A study of babies born during the intifada has shown a decrease in coverage of measles immunization. The loss of efficacy of vaccines administered to children is a consequence of recurrent electricity cuts, which disrupt the cold chain. This problem is compounded by difficulties experienced in transporting vaccines from the warehouses of the Central Health Ministry to primary health-care centres in villages, refugee camps and remote areas. Those vaccines are often transported on donkeys or simply carried by ordinary citizens and health workers. Vaccination programmes have been disrupted by closures and curfews imposed on cities, villages and refugee camps, sometimes for months.

29. The decrease in the level of immunity to measles among children under five has been associated with vitamin A deficiency. The study has shown that 73% of those children suffer from vitamin A deficiency, with 23% suffering severe deficiency. This may lead to serious health complications and to an increase in morbidity and mortality in children in general and in children suffering from measles in particular.

30. Although reasonable successes have been recorded in preventing and reducing cases of zoonotic diseases, especially after implementation of the brucellosis control project by the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture and international institutions, which reduced the prevalence of that disease in Palestine to 3.11% in 2001, the brucellosis immunization programme for livestock was discontinued because of the measures taken by the Israeli army, the ubiquity of Israeli road blocks and the difficulty of movement from cities to the surrounding villages.

31. Cases of leishmaniasis have been on the increase in the governorates of Jenin, Nablus and Jericho on the West Bank, owing to the suspension of the vector-control campaign.

32. If the current situation continues on it will certainly lead to outbreaks of various infectious, zoonotic and re-emergent diseases among Palestinian children, thus posing a serious threat to all children in the region, as infectious diseases do not recognize any obstacles or boundaries.

CONCLUSION

33. The Ministry of Health strongly denounces Israeli military acts of aggression in the occupied Palestinian territories; they are unacceptable and their consequences have manifested themselves in the fields of human health and safety, leading to an enormous rise in deaths, injuries and disabilities and further weakening the infrastructure in all the occupied territories. We at the Ministry of Health demand that the international community bring pressure to bear on Israel to compel it to comply with and implement the agreed provisions of international law agreed upon, and notably their humanitarian aspects, and to implement the fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. Efforts must be made to secure the delivery of humanitarian aid in the occupied Palestinian territories to alleviate the grave humanitarian crisis faced by the Palestinian people. We call upon the international community to bring pressure to bear on the Government of Israel to abandon its practice of hampering the movement of medical emergency teams and ambulances and of preventing them from carrying the wounded to hospitals for treatment.

34. We also call upon the international community to pressure the Israeli Government to stop the building of the Israeli wall separating and annexing Palestinian lands, in view of the threat it poses to the lives and health of citizens by severing all communication between members of the same Palestinian society, and to put an end to the policy of racial segregation practised by the Israeli government against the Palestinians through the building of settlements in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967.

35. Equity in access to health and other social services is the essence of human safety and security; it is a basic human right which must be enjoyed by all in order to preserve their dignity and ensure respect for their humanity.

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