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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-fourth World Health Assembly.

ANNEX

**State of Palestine
Palestinian Higher Health Council –
Palestinian Ministry of Health**

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

Report submitted to the Fifty-fourth World Health Assembly

April 2001

INTRODUCTION

Following the Oslo peace agreements, signed in May 1994, the Palestinian Health Ministry began implementing its first five-year health plan. Implementation of the second five-year health plan was started in May 1999.

In spite of difficulties imposed by the Israeli occupation, we have been able to establish a wide network of primary health care centres in villages and towns which ensures equal distribution of services, facilitates access for patients and applies the overall family care concept.

At the same time, the Ministry was also engaged in restoring and expanding existing hospitals and creating new ones in deprived areas. It was possible in that way to provide one bed for every 850 citizens alongside additional tertiary care services including heart, brain and neuro-surgery.

We have also been providing services such as health care for women of child-bearing age, family planning, school health and health education. A list of essential drugs has also been established and applied with the technical assistance of the World Health Organization.

Nevertheless, we have unfortunately been facing a war waged by Israel since 29 September 2000; this has involved land, air and sea blockades, as well as the use of missiles, explosives, harmful gases and other internationally banned weapons. Children were not spared and they have been shot at and injured, especially in the head, eyes and the upper part of the body. This has put an extra burden on the Ministry of Health and private health institutions, which have had to cope with up to 14 245 hospital admissions due to injury, while another 8435 people received treatment in the field.

Blockade and dismemberment deprived whole villages of access to treatment in towns. On the other hand, immunization, prevention and environmental health teams have been unable to reach nearby villages. As a consequence, immunization rates have dropped from 95% to between 65% and 75% in the past year especially in village areas. Mother and child care have suffered the same fate. Meanwhile, ambulances and medical teams have been targeted also, thus adding a dramatic dimension to the suffering that we have been undergoing in the last eight months.

However, we still hope and believe that the best strategic choice for us would be a just and comprehensive peace leading to the establishment of the State of Palestine, with Jerusalem as its capital side by side with Israel in application of the relevant United Nations resolutions.

The light of peace shall shine and prevail over all darkness and difficulties.

Dr Riad Al-Zaaniun

Minister of Health

DEMOGRAPHIC INDICATORS

Population

Between 1967 and mid-2000 the population of Palestinians in the occupied territories rose to 3 150 056, including 1 138 126 in the Gaza Strip with a population density of 3065 per square kilometre, and 2 011 930 in the West Bank, where the population density is 347 people per square kilometre.

Refugees are estimated to constitute 73% of the total population in Gaza and 42% in the West Bank, all living in Palestinian refugee camps.

Young people constitute a large proportion of Palestinian society. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, children under 15 represent 47% of the population whereas those between 15 and 60 years of age account for 39.1% of the total population. People over 60 are estimated at 4.9%.

About 50% of the population live in families with an average of 6.9 persons. Some 91% of those families live in crowded housing units. Only 31.7% of those units are connected to sewerage systems.

Population growth

Population growth rates have been decreasing substantially. In 1995, the growth rate was estimated at 6% while in 2000 it dropped to about 3%.

Education

Having lost all property as a result of wars against them, displacement from their lands and dispersal, Palestinians attach great importance to education. 85.1% of those between 5 and 17 years of age attend schools. This percentage has dropped by more than 50% in the past seven months because of closures, communication disruption and repeated Israeli blockades on different counties and districts, as well as bombardment of schools. As a result, students at both basic and higher education levels have been prevented from reaching their institutions.

Fertility

Fertility rates were estimated at 5.61 in the West Bank and 6.91 in the Gaza Strip, where the highest birth rate (337/1000) was registered among the 25-29 age group, followed by the 20-24 age group with a birth rate of 334/1000. In the West Bank the highest rate registered was in the 20-24 age group (288/1000), followed by the 25-29 age group, with a birth rate of 287/1000.

Mortality

In 1999, the mortality rate was 3.35/1000 with an infant mortality rate of 21/1000. Other mortality rates registered for that year were 0.98/1000 for the 1-5 age group; 0.22/1000 for the 6-14 age group; 0.6/1000 for the 15-44 age group; 6.8/1000 for the 45-64 age group; and 44.7/1000 for those over 65 years of age.

Common diseases in the occupied territories

The most common disease was malnutrition, indicated by a number of body weight decreases registered among children. Pulmonary infections represent the second most common disease. Other registered diseases included pulmonary tuberculosis, infectious hepatitis (types A, B and C), brucellosis, typhoid and viral conjunctivitis, as well as parasitic diseases, including entamoebiasis, giardiasis and ascariasis.

ISRAELI VIOLATIONS IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

The health conditions of the Palestinian people are complicated and aggravated by Israeli practices and violations of basic legal rights, especially the right to live and to have medical treatment. Such practices include the occupation of land by force and the expulsion of Palestinian owners, leading to their displacement and depriving them of education and decent living opportunities.

Throughout the end of 2000 and the beginning of 2001, Israeli occupation forces continued their violation of the Palestinian people's right to live; the killing of 405 martyrs has been confirmed between 29 September 2000 and 18 April 2001. The numbers of those killed were estimated at 247 in the West Bank and 158 in the Gaza Strip. Among those killed, 121 were children under the age of 18. Around 22 680 other people were injured, 8435 of whom received treatment in the field while another 14 245 were admitted to hospitals in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. A review of those injuries revealed 23% to be head injuries. Live ammunition caused 36% of injuries; 28% were caused by rubber-coated metal bullets and 5% to 6% by missile fragments. Of those injured 48% were children (less than 18 years of age). Among the injured, 513 were transferred for hospital treatment in other countries, including Austria, Egypt, Germany, Greece, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic, Turkey, United Arab Emirates. Those injuries resulted in 2200 disablements among which was the loss of one or both eyes in 32 cases.

Air, land and sea bombardment, as well as repeated use of targeted land-to-land missiles, are among the most serious dangers inflicted on Palestinian citizens by occupation forces; many fatalities have resulted.

In addition, Israeli special units continued their elimination and illegal and cold-blooded killing of Palestinians: a total of 37 citizens have been killed by Israeli special forces.

As regards restriction of freedom, the occupying authorities still detain more than 2700 Arab and Palestinian political prisoners in 10 central prisons and investigation centres. Among those detainees are young people under 18 years of age, and elderly people suffering from various chronic diseases. In addition, those prisoners are detained by Israel in prisons located beyond their living areas, in violation of Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

As regards house demolition, a document published by Amnesty International has confirmed the destruction by Israel of not less than 2650 houses since 1987, leading to 16 700 people losing their homes, with the consequent psychological shock to those families and individuals, who are usually not informed of the time or date of the demolition: they are suddenly faced with the arrival of bulldozers and tens of soldiers and military machines. Amnesty International has attributed the demolition of Palestinian houses and the refusal of legal building permission to the Israeli policy of land confiscation and restriction of land use to urban development and construction of settlements for Israelis.

Settlement in the occupied territories

Land confiscation and settlement in Palestinian territories, as well as the displacement of their original inhabitants, have been and still are a general policy applied by successive Israeli governments. The present Israeli Government is not an exception. This policy is considered a violation of Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. It is also a war crime according to article 8 of the agreement on the formation of an international tribunal, signed in Rome in July 1998. This crime is conducted according to a plan and in spite of its illegality as confirmed by the international community through resolutions adopted by the General Assembly and the Security Council of the United Nations, especially Security Council resolution 452 issued in 1979, according to which the Israeli policy of settlement in occupied Palestinian territories has no legal foundation and constitutes a violation of the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War.

Twenty-two new sites were established by settlers in 1999. In addition to lands confiscated to construct special access roads the total surface area of which amounted to 1129 dunums; another 9980 dunums were also confiscated in the south of the West Bank in order to build industrial settlement regions, in addition to the confiscation and bulldozing of 11 000 dunums since 29 September 2000.

Work and workers

Israeli violation of the right to work has become a daily policy. In addition to such violations are those committed by the occupying Israeli soldiers against the rights of Palestinian workers, whereby many of them are exposed daily to incidents at check points and crossing points along the Green Line. Such incidents include assaults on workers, inspection assisted by police dogs, and forcing workers back. In addition, Israeli civilians carry out racial assaults on workers, hitting and stabbing them. The perpetrators remain protected and unpunished by the official Israeli authorities. More than 125 000 workers have been prevented from going to work within Green Line areas.

Education

The right to education is still violated through continuous raids and bombing of educational institutions by the Israelis, as well as the detention of many students, teachers and university staff, especially at check points. Student residences are also raided to prevent students from attending university courses as part of the daily actions of the occupying forces aimed at dismembering Palestinian towns and villages and isolating them from the outside world. Hundreds of students at universities in the West Bank have been prevented for more than three years from visiting their families in Gaza.

Closure and blockade

The policy of Israeli closure and blockade of Palestinian areas has continued, leading to a number of violations of the right of Palestinians to health. Continued separation of the West Bank from the Gaza Strip, as well as separation of Jerusalem from other Palestinian areas, together with closure and dismemberment in Gaza and the West Bank have deprived many patients of access to health facilities and services outside their living areas. Closure has also prevented large numbers of unarmed civilians injured by the arms of occupying Israeli forces from being transferred from their towns and villages to health centres and hospitals, leading to death or serious complications as a result of delays in proper hospital treatment. In addition, many health workers have faced difficulties in terms of restricted movement from homes to workplaces in hospitals and health centres.

Internal closures

Hundreds of barricades were placed by the occupying forces at the entrances to all Palestinian villages and towns, and large numbers of residential districts were completely isolated, including: Baga Ash-sharqiyah, Ya'bad, Um El-Reihan, Tol Karm villages, Aalquiha, Selfit, Harris, Deir Estia, Beit Foric, Beit Dajan, Aharah, Ain El-Beida, Na'aleen, Qbeiah, Bedras, Al-Media, Deir Qaddis, Ras Qarqar, Al-Jania, Hossan and Al-Mouasio.

Dismemberment

All towns and villages in the West Bank have been divided and separated into 43 areas while Gaza Strip has been cut into four areas.

Road barricades placed by the Israeli authorities are also causing delays of many hours for ambulances carrying seriously ill persons who are forced to leave the vehicles to undergo routine checks; their lives are thus endangered while they wait for permission to pass. On the other hand, Ministry of Health staff working in Gaza and the West Bank face difficulties in getting their passage permits issued owing to restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities.

Closures and curfews

The Israeli Government implements a policy of collective punishment which affects three million Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, depriving citizens of access to health services, limiting the movement of medical teams, and preventing medicines, medical supplies and vaccines from reaching many Palestinian areas and villages.

Palestinians are allowed to leave their homes for only two to three hours in every few days, particularly in the centre of Hebron, where 40 000 Palestinians live, in the villages of Hawara and Silet Alzahr, in Northern Asira and in other rural areas. Some 150 violations have been recorded where ambulances have been prevented from entering these areas at roadblocks and barricades erected by the Israeli occupation army at entry points.

Siege and isolation

The West Bank and Gaza Strip have been cut off from the outside world, with the closure of Gaza airport, the bridge linking the West Bank to Jordan, and the Rafa pass to Egypt. Crossing points and corridors from the West Bank and Gaza Strip into Israel at Beit Haroun, Mintar and other locations have been closed; the safe corridor between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank also has been closed.

Jerusalem has been cut off from the rest of the West Bank, restricting the right of Palestinians to health, as is the daily practice with respect to residents of Jerusalem who go to work or live in the West Bank; their identity cards are confiscated, depriving them of their right to health on the pretext that they have lost the status of residents of Jerusalem.

Environment

Incessant Israeli bombardment and destruction of innumerable apartment buildings and civil institutions have caused untold damage to the environment and infrastructure in Palestinian territories,

in terms of power and communications failures, destruction of roads and electric transformers, the bulldozing of thousands of dunums and uprooting of fruit trees and destruction of greenhouses. The daily draining off of fresh water by Israel, through special pipes from Israeli settlements to areas inside the Green Line, has depleted the water resources of the Gaza Strip. Thousands of dunums of cultivated land have been inundated and private property and factories have been destroyed, as, for example, on 26 March 2001 when the east and north parts of Gaza were flooded with waste water from the Israeli settlement of Nhal Onze, after a dike collapsed and more than 5 million litres of waste water flooded the cultivated lands, private properties and plants in the affected area. There has also been the use of Palestinian villages as rubbish dumps for Israeli settlements.

The Israelis have used unknown gases over the past three months. New types of gases were released by Israeli occupation forces which caused damage to the nervous system and respiratory system, forcing 150 victims to seek hospital treatment. We have called on WHO and the President of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to send experts to help identify the gases used on people, some of whom are still suffering from the effects, displaying strange symptoms such as black spots on their skin. There is a distinct possibility that Israeli occupation forces have used depleted-uranium missiles in the bombardment of Palestinian towns and villages. A committee representing several ministries has been established to investigate evidence of such use, but occupation forces have prevented the Palestinian National Authority from sending specimens of the ammunition and bullets used to friendly countries for analysis in their laboratories.

As a consequence of all the above, environmental health and programmes, particularly the monitoring of drinking-water safety, insect control and sanitation programmes, have been adversely affected; this is because health personnel have not been able to move around and reach the areas targeted, which are often close to Israeli settlements.

THE HEALTH SYSTEM

The Palestinian Ministry of Health shoulders the prime responsibility for providing health services for the Palestinian people in the areas under Palestinian Authority rule, where, in cooperation with other health service providers, it organizes and ensures all preventive, diagnostic, curative and rehabilitating services. UNRWA is the second main provider of preventive and primary health care services in the refugee camps in various governorates of Palestine, and it purchases secondary care services from Palestinian hospitals, whereas the private sector, civil, and nongovernmental and international institutions play a more limited role in the provision of such services, especially in the Gaza Strip, where they provide only diagnostic and curative services.

Despite contributions of the informal sector, the crisis caused by the lack of hospital health care services still persists. The Ministry of Health implements a number of projects to overcome the crisis, including the expansion and modernization of several hospitals such as the Jericho, Jenin and Tulkarm hospitals in the West Bank, the Nasser Hospital in Khan Younes, and the European Hospital, with a capacity of 260 beds, in the south of the Gaza Strip.

Attacks on hospitals and primary health care centres

The hospitals of Beit Jala and Al-Dibs, the French hospital, and Al-Yamama Hospital in the province of Bethlehem have been bombarded with 500 mm calibre ammunition.

Settlers have attacked the Matla'a Hospital in Jerusalem with automatic weapons; the guard was wounded.

The occupation forces and settlers have launched three separate attacks with light and heavy weapons on the Alia Hospital in Hebron, wounding several patients and causing a power failure. Al-Maqased and Al-Mala'a hospitals in Jerusalem were under siege more than once. Repeated attacks with light and heavy arms have been launched against Al-Maqased, Al-Matla'a, Jericho, Ramallah, and Alia hospital in Hebron, as well as Nasser Hospital in Khan Younes.

Numerous primary health care centres in various parts of the country, such as the Ma'n Clinic run by UNRWA, have been attacked and shelled.

Medical teams were the target of Israeli aggression while carrying out missions: five team members have been killed and 97 wounded.

THE HEALTH SECTOR

In an attempt to counter Israeli aggression, the health sector has undertaken the following:

1. Expanding the present hospitals and raising the level of preparedness, which has required the addition of 600 beds, of which 50 are in intensive care units, as well as equipment for 10 operating theatres.
2. Equipping hospitals to provide health services in the areas isolated by Israeli barricades. In the Gaza governorates, Al Najjar hospital in the Rafah area has been provided with 60 beds; Al-Aqsa hospital in Deir El-Balah has been given 60 beds; Al-Quds Hospital south of the city of Gaza – 60 beds, and Martyr Muhammed Al-Durra Children's Hospital – 50 beds. In the West Bank governorates, the Za'tara Hospital has been provided with 30 beds, Kalkilya Hospital with 60 beds and Selfiet Hospital with 60 beds; in addition, a number of field hospitals for emergencies have been set up at Kalkilya and Ramallah. Primary care centres have also been strengthened to respond to emergencies.

Family planning and women's health

The Ministry has established a department entrusted with the responsibility for the health and development of women. It develops policies and plans related to women's issues and family. In cooperation with women's and international organizations, some 29 family planning centres have been established in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. Those centres hold education courses, provide maternity services, implement programmes to promote breastfeeding, and raise the level of awareness among women, in addition to undertaking surveys on maternal mortality and health education. This year, the department initiated a project to integrate reproductive health services in public and nongovernmental primary health care centres, and to supply those centres with the necessary equipment through an UNFPA project.

Numerous other programmes are being implemented by the Ministry of Health with the help of the departments concerned, despite the almost total halt in their work because of the Israeli aggression, repeated closures and isolation of towns and villages and severing of all means of communications between them. Among the worst affected programmes is immunization, where reports show that the rate of immunization decreased by 8% during the first six months of the events; immunization of

schoolchildren has fallen by 30% compared to last year. Reports indicate also that in November 2000, there was a sharp decrease of 35% in immunizing women against tetanus. Power failures have damaged large amounts of vaccines and disrupted immunization. School health programmes have also been affected because of the inability of health teams to reach schools as planned, leading to a 50% to 60% decrease in their activities. Health education activities also have come to a halt.

Ambulance and emergency services

Despite the increase in hospital beds and the establishment of new hospitals in the isolated areas, the level of preparedness has been augmented in 250 centres in West Bank villages, and 40 rural centres in the Gaza Strip have been equipped; 27 such centres are now open to provide emergency services 24 hours a day. Some 1250 health workers have been assigned to emergency services. Over and above these additional burdens on the health system, Israeli occupation forces have shelled a number of these centres, destroying nine ambulances, and killing Dr Thabet Ahmed Thabet, Dr Henry Fischer (German citizen), Dr Wael Khweiter, nurse Abdul Halim Kharti, and ambulance driver Bassam El-Biblisi; the driver was killed while attempting to save the child Muhammed Al-Durra, whose death has shocked the world. Over 97 members of medical teams have sustained injuries while carrying out their duties.

Health sector finances

New difficulties have arisen in two key areas. First, health insurance premiums have decreased because the number of those who pay such premiums has fallen to a record low – less than 20% of the population – owing to the loss of employment by some 125 000 workers within the Green Line, as well as a large number of workers employed in Palestinian plants and workshops, and because of increasing poverty in the population. The Ministry of Health has undertaken to provide free health insurance for all victims of repeated Israeli attacks on Palestinians and their land.

Secondly, Israel has withheld dues owed to the Palestinian authorities from customs duties and valued added tax, and this has made money needed for the daily provision of health services extremely scarce.

Total international emergency aid up to early February 2001, according to a report by the United Nations Special Coordinator, stood at US\$ 40 million for UNRWA, US\$ 4 million for the Palestinian Ministry of Health, US\$ 3.4 million for the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, and US\$ 3 million for the nongovernmental health institutions. Australia, Belgium, Brunei, Canada, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, were the countries providing such assistance. WHO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, Save the Children, as well as other international institutions, have helped in rendering such assistance. Aid in kind was also received from sister Arab countries, namely Egypt, Jordan, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia; this included ambulance vehicles, medicines, medical equipment, blood and other supplies. Some countries also sent medical teams to lend support to Palestinian health teams in responding to the events.

CONCLUSION

The State of Palestine had hoped that its annual report this year would be on the fruits of international assistance to the health sector in rehabilitating the Palestinian health system, so that it

could continue to provide health services to the Palestinian people. But continued Israeli aggression has made the achievement of health goals impossible, has destroyed what had been achieved, and halted the process of development in its tracks. The Palestinian health system has instead started to prepare itself, with the help of Arab and international support, to face the Israeli aggression, which has burdened health institutions with the task of receiving thousands of casualties, as well as the future responsibility of dealing with thousands of disabilities caused by the aggression, which requires a firm international stand, international protection for the Palestinian people and its health institutions, and urgent action to provide the assistance needed to save and protect lives in Palestine, to completely dislodge the occupation, and to accord Palestinians their legitimate right in establishing their own State with full sovereignty over its territories and natural resources, and freedom of movement in all parts of its one homeland, with international access to all countries of the world.

The Palestinian people look to all countries of the world to stand by it and support the people in their quest for their rights and the achievement of the noble objective of WHO.

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