The Healthcare Situation in Gaza; a Catastrophe the World is Witnessing

Mr Mahmoud Kandil

Plastic Surgery Registrar, Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust, UK

(Former trainee in Al-Shifaa Hospital in Gaza in 2017)

Correspondence: drkandil91@gmail.com

Dear Editor

Since the commencement of the war in Gaza on 07/10/23, health care facilities and professionals have been deliberately targeted by the IDF.

As of 02/12/23, the IDF has ruthlessly claimed the lives of 264 health care professionals in Gaza, among them 47 doctors of various specialties, 22 dentists, 24 medical/dental students, 4 medical scientists, 84 nurses, 22 paramedics, 10 physiotherapists, 30 pharmacists, 14 lab technicians, and 7 optometrists.

Furthermore, Israel targeted a total of 135 health care facilities, leaving 21 hospitals and 37 health care centres totally un-operational including Al-Shifa Hospital Complex (the largest health care facility in Gaza), Since at least 2008, Israeli propaganda has circulated assertions suggesting that militants hide or launch attacks from hospitals in Gaza and use patients as human shields. However, Israel's military has failed to present credible evidence supporting these claims, and independent investigators have found them to be baseless. Individuals with extensive experience working in Gaza hospitals, are inconsistent with these allegations, they have not encountered militants operating within hospitals or restricting access to specific hospital areas. The Israeli army has been found to disseminate falsehoods to justify its actions, as exemplified by the case of the murder of Palestinian American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, where Israel was repeatedly caught lying about its responsibility. The international community continues to give Israel the benefit of the doubt however, and often

quoted lines of "Israel having the right to defend itself" even though it targets hospitals are extremely troubling.

Patients and internal refugees find themselves trapped inside the hospitals, with the Israeli war machine attacking them from all sides, their plight disregarding international laws and human rights agreements. Here we remember the haunting memory of the Al Ahli Arabi hospital massacre on 17/10/23, where over 500 patients, staff, and refugees were killed by the Israeli army, and leaving thousands more injured in mere seconds. Hospitals in Gaza are no longer places of sanctuary; the IDF has seen to that.

Moreover, health care facilities now grapple with a scarcity of essential supplies such as sedatives, antibiotics, and dressing. Surgeries are conducted without anaesthesia on hospital floors, exposing children, women, and the elderly to shockingly inhospitable conditions devoid of basic resources. The healthcare staff, toiling without respite for 60 consecutive days, face a dire shortage of manpower, leaving them without a chance to reunite with their families or ensure their own safety.

Some colleagues have left under bombardment, heading south to serve in other hospitals, while others make the even tougher decision to stay, to face a tragic end alongside their patients in a very sad image that should be remembered forever, representing the ultimate sacrifice of the health care heroes in Gaza and the essence of the medical message through history. These

men and women are putting their patients first, at great risk to themselves.

Simultaneously, 40 healthcare professionals, including the general director of Al-Shifa Medical Complex, Dr. Muhammed Abu Selmia, have been kidnapped by the IDF. Dr Selmia, refused to abandon his post and leave patients, including neonates in incubators, to perish. Despite the pleas of international humanitarian organizations to safeguard hospitals and their workers in Gaza, these professionals were unlawfully abducted, violating human rights agreements, and constituting clear war crimes. Since their abduction, all contact has been lost with the 40 hostages, as Israel remains unyielding in providing any information about their fate. They could be alive or dead.

Dr. Munir Albursh, the spokesman for the Ministry of Health in Gaza, captured a harrowing image from Kamal Odwan Hospital on 05/12/23. Describing the scene as catastrophic, with no electricity due to a fuel shortage, thousands of injured individuals and martyrs lay strewn across the emergency department, reminiscent of a horror movie. Medical teams find themselves powerless, surrounded by snipers who indiscriminately target anyone entering or leaving the hospital. With over 10 thousand refugees seeking shelter in the hospital, attempts to evacuate are met with airstrikes, perpetrating yet another massacre and war crime against innocent civilians, patients, and healthcare professionals and facilities.

The situation in Gaza is apocalyptic; the health care system is falling apart whilst the world looks on. More than 2.3 million people have been left with no access to health care facilities or services, including more than 50,000 pregnant women, acute and chronic patients and war injured civilians who face a dark fate of further infection and complications. Meanwhile, the world looks on.