



WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the Special Session of the Executive Board on the health situation in the occupied Palestinian territory – 10 December 2023

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Your Excellency Dr Hanan Mohamed Al Kuwari, Chair of the Executive Board,

Excellencies, dear colleagues and friends,

I think we all agree that this is a meeting we would rather not be having.

As I have said repeatedly, I deplore the barbaric and unjustifiable attacks by Hamas on Israel on the 7th of October, which killed more than 1200 people.

I am appalled by reports of gender-based violence during the attacks, and by the mistreatment of hostages.

I am relieved that 114 hostages have now been released, and I repeat my call for the remaining hostages to be released.

I well understand the anger, grief and fear of the Israeli people following the horrific attacks two months ago.

I also understand the anger, grief and fear of the people of Gaza, who had already suffered through 16 years of blockade, and are now enduring the destruction of their families, their homes, their communities and the life they knew.

Dr Mike Ryan and his team will provide a more detailed presentation on the health situation in Gaza, but it is stating the obvious to say that the impact of the conflict on health is catastrophic.

More than 17 000 people are reported to have died in Gaza, including 7000 children – and we don't know how many are buried under the rubble of their homes.

More than 46 000 injuries have been reported.

1.9 million people have been displaced – almost the entire population of the Gaza strip – and are looking for shelter anywhere they can find it. But nowhere and no-one is safe in Gaza.

As more and more people move to a smaller and smaller area, overcrowding, combined with the lack of adequate food, water, shelter and sanitation, are creating the ideal conditions for disease to spread.

On average, there is one shower unit for every 700 people, and one toilet for every 150 people.

There are worrying signals of epidemic diseases including bloody diarrhoea and jaundice, and there have also been reports of high levels of diarrhoeal diseases and respiratory infections.

The risk is expected to worsen with the deteriorating situation and approaching winter conditions.

Gaza's health system is on its knees and collapsing.

Only 14 hospitals out of the original 36 are even partially functional, 2 north of the Wadi Gaza and 12 in the south.

Only 1400 beds are available out of an original 3500, while about two-thirds of primary health care centres are non-functional.

The two major hospitals in southern Gaza are operating at three times their bed capacity, running out of supplies and sheltering thousands of displaced people.

Meanwhile, more than 180 women give birth in Gaza every single day.

There are 2000 patients on cancer therapy;

350 000 patients with diabetes, heart disease and hypertension;

And at least 20 000 civilians in need of acute psychiatric care, and many more are expected to suffer from severe mental disorders as a result of the conflict.

I visited Al-Shifa hospital in Gaza City five years ago, in 2018. I toured a dialysis ward and a neonatal intensive care unit, and spoke with health workers and patients.

Even then, conditions were extremely difficult for health workers, and for patients.

Now the work of the health workers is impossible, and they are directly in the firing line.

Since the 7th of October, WHO has verified more than 449 attacks on health care in Gaza and the West Bank, and 60 attacks on health care in Israel. Health care should never be a target.

I also grieve the loss of more than 100 of our UN colleagues in Gaza, including our own Dima Alhaj, who was killed alongside her six-month old son, her husband and her two brothers.

In summary, health needs have increased dramatically, and the capacity of the health system has been reduced to one third of what it was.

WHO is on the ground in Gaza, alongside our partners, to support health workers, who are physically and mentally exhausted and are doing their best in unimaginable conditions.

By the way, today I have our colleague Rob Holden with us, who just returned from Gaza, and our Regional Director Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari and his team are with us for any questions you have. They can give you the first-hand situation.

Resupplying these health facilities has become extremely difficult and is deeply compromised by the security situation on the ground and inadequate resupply from outside Gaza.

Humanitarian agencies are struggling to cope.

The resolution you are discussing today, if adopted, asks me as Director-General to do several things:

To report on the public health implications of the crisis;

To assess the extent of psychiatric morbidity;

To strengthen technical and material assistance;

And to strengthen our work with partners.

But I must be frank with you: these tasks are almost impossible in the current circumstances.

Indeed, it is for that reason that the Secretary-General last week invoked Article 99 of the United Nations Charter, and called for a humanitarian ceasefire.

I echo the Secretary-General's call – a call I have made repeatedly myself, including during my report to the Security Council two weeks ago. A ceasefire is the only way to truly protect and promote the health of the people of Gaza.

I deeply regret that the Security Council was unable to adopt a resolution on such a ceasefire last Friday.

I know that negotiations on the resolution for this meeting have been difficult, but I very much appreciate the spirit of cooperation and compromise you have demonstrated, and I welcome your commitment to finding consensus.

It is only through dialogue, mutual understanding and finding common ground that we can ever hope to find a resolution to this crisis, and to the many other crises in our troubled world.

This year is our 75th year as WHO. The opening words of our constitution remain more relevant than ever: that health is a fundamental human right for all people, and that health is fundamental to peace and security.

I urge you to use this moment to fulfil that vision, recognising as our founders did in 1948 that there is no health without peace, and no peace without health.

I hope you will use health as a bridge to peace.

Thank you very much, and Chair, back to you.