

Urgent humanitarian appeal: Protecting the lives of women and children in the Gaza Strip (Palestine)

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In October 2023, a grave humanitarian crisis unfolded in the Gaza Strip, Palestine, home to 2.4 million residents. United-Nations experts have officially classified the targeted bombings of hospitals and schools as crimes against humanity (i.e. genocide), urging an immediate cessation of these acts.¹ The civilian population, particularly children and women, bears the brunt of this crisis.² Shocking reports as of November 3, 2023, indicate that 2326 women and 3760 children, accounting for 67%–70% of all casualties, have lost their lives, with thousands more sustaining injuries.³ On average, 420 children are killed or injured every day, with a child's life lost every 10 min.⁴ On November 1, 2023, the United-Nations declared that Gaza had become a burial ground for countless children, and there were fears of further casualties due to dehydration.⁵ The dire situation has left the healthcare system in ruins, with patients occupying corridors, surgeons conducting operations without anesthesia, 5500 pregnant women expected to give birth within 30 days, and the lives of 1000 dialysis patients and 130 premature infants in incubators hanging in the balance.⁴ It's important to note that this may be just a glimpse of the immense challenges faced by the people of Gaza.⁴ The ongoing bombings, destruction of healthcare facilities, mass displacement, shortages of water and electricity, and restricted access to food and medicine are severely impeding maternal, neonatal, and child health services.³ Initial assessments by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees have identified around 4600 displaced pregnant women in need of medical care.³ It is estimated that there are 50,000 pregnant women in the Gaza Strip, with over 180 giving birth daily.³ An alarming 15% of these women may experience complications during pregnancy or childbirth requiring additional medical care, which they

currently struggle to access.³ With more than 14 hospitals and 45 primary healthcare centers closed, some women are compelled to give birth in precarious conditions, including shelters, homes, and amidst the debris, or in overwhelmed healthcare facilities where sanitation deteriorates and the risk of infection and medical complications surges.³ The psychological toll of hostilities also has direct, and sometimes fatal, consequences for reproductive health, leading to an increase in stress-related miscarriages, stillbirths, and premature births.³ Approximately 380 newborns residing in these facilities require immediate medical attention to save their lives.³ In the event of hospitals running out of fuel, the lives of premature infants relying on neonatal and intensive care services would be in jeopardy as incubators and medical equipment cease to function.^{3,4} The tragic consequences of violence reverberate in the form of both immediate and long-term physical trauma, encompassing injuries, malnutrition, infectious diseases, disabilities, and chronic health conditions.^{6–8} Moreover, psychological effects, such as post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, behavioral issues, emotional disorders, attachment problems, and desensitization to violence, are deeply concerning.^{6–8} Even before the conflict began, malnutrition was a significant concern among pregnant women, impacting child survival and development.³ The declining access to food and water makes it increasingly challenging for mothers to nourish and care

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for their families, heightening the risks of malnutrition, diseases, and mortality.³ Reports indicate that, as of November 3, 2023, more than 22,500 cases of acute respiratory infections and 12,000 cases of diarrhea have been reported, a particularly troubling situation given the elevated malnutrition rates.³ Furthermore, the lack of access to vaccinations and proper healthcare in conflict-affected areas poses a grave threat to children, rendering them more susceptible to preventable diseases, epidemics, high infant mortality rates, and weakened immune systems.⁹ As of November 4, 2023, a total of 16 humanitarian appeals have been published in scientific journals.⁶⁻²¹ This editorial serves as an additional humanitarian appeal, calling for the safeguarding of all civilians, with special emphasis on the most vulnerable. Immediate access to humanitarian aid is imperative to alleviate their suffering. Vulnerable individuals, especially children and women, are entitled to special protection in accordance with international humanitarian law and human rights.

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