

Israeli troops force doctors and patients to leave Gaza's al-Shifa Hospital at gunpoint

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Gaza City, November 18 (RHC)-- Israeli forces ordered doctors, patients and displaced people at Gaza's al-Shifa Hospital to evacuate the medical compound, forcing some to leave by gunpoint, medical sources told Al Jazeera.

Doctors said the facility, which has been under siege by Israeli troops for several days, was now largely deserted hours after soldiers ordered people to leave on Saturday.

But in a post on X, the Israeli army spokesperson denied giving any order, saying the “IDF responded to the request of the director of Shifa Hospital to allow Gazan citizens who were sheltering in the hospital and who wish to evacuate from Shifa Hospital towards the humanitarian crossing in the Gaza Strip via a secure axis.”

Mohammed Zaqout, the director-general of hospitals in Gaza, reiterated to Al Jazeera: “I categorically deny these false allegations [from the Israeli army] ... I am telling you we were forced to leave at gunpoint.”

More than 7,000 people, including patients in critical condition and newborn babies fighting for their lives, were sheltered inside al-Shifa.

A doctor in the hospital told Al Jazeera that at around 9 am local time (7:00 GMT), they received the order from the Israelis to leave in “one hour” -- but that it was “impossible” to evacuate everyone as they did not have ambulances or transportation means to transfer patients.

The situation caused “a great state of panic and fear” in the hospital, Al Jazeera’s Youmna EISayed said, reporting from Khan Younis in southern Gaza.

Many people left on foot. But “patients who cannot move, amputees, and those with critical conditions” were forced to remain behind with a handful of medical staff, Mohammed Abu Salmiya, the director of the al-Shifa Hospital, told Al Jazeera. “The situation is really dire,” he said, adding that the facility was largely deserted.

Those in al-Shifa had included at least 300 patients, many of them in critical condition, as well as thousands of displaced families. It also included “at least 35 premature babies who already for eight days now have been out of their incubators because of the lack of oxygen and the lack of electricity”, EISayed said. There were 39 babies who had been left without incubators; four died late on Friday and five are severely ill now, our correspondent added.

Palestinian Minister of Health Mai al-Kaila said international institutions should intervene and transfer the premature babies from al-Shifa to hospitals in the occupied West Bank or Egypt. “There is no hospital in the Gaza Strip that has the capacity to accommodate the wounded and premature babies,” she said.

After the Israeli army’s deadline passed on Saturday morning, Omar Zaqout, the hospital’s supervisor, told Al Jazeera that forced evacuations began, adding that the scenes outside the facility were “appalling.”

“We were told to leave through al-Wehda road. Dozens of dead bodies are scattered on the road,” he said. “Many homeless people who cannot walk are left out in the open.” Munir al-Barsh, a doctor at al-Shifa Hospital, said that the Israeli army warned that all those leaving had to wave a white handkerchief and walk in a single line. “They were humiliated by soldiers all along the road,” al-Barsh told Al Jazeera.

“Many of the patients were put on wheelchairs or rolling beds. Family members were forced to carry their wounded children or parents themselves ... These are horrible, unprecedented scenes,” he said.

Doctors said the Israeli army instructed people to evacuate through al-Rashid street, not the usual street or route that people evacuating to the south are supposed to take — the Salah al-Din street.

“There is no transportation means in Gaza City and the northern parts because of a lack of fuel. So people are expected to evacuate on foot,” EISayed said. She said Israel’s army had not provided people evacuating with any means of transportation, with any fuel for ambulances or for any cars to transfer patients, premature babies and displaced families.

The hospital has been without food, water, electricity and oxygen for at least a week, while Israeli troops and tanks raided the facility over the last couple of days.

Zaqout added that the lack of water supply at al-Shifa has led to what he called an “absence of hygiene and cleanliness.” “The electrical power has been out more than three weeks. Infants and newborn babies are left without oxygen. It is nothing but a medieval cave,” he said.

The Palestinian Authority, that governs the occupied West Bank, released a statement in response to the evacuations. “The evacuation of al-Shifa deepens the humanitarian and environmental catastrophe Gaza faces,” it said. Israel’s actions represent “another hideous facet of the crimes of ethnic cleansing and genocide committed by the occupation forces against Palestinians,” it added.

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