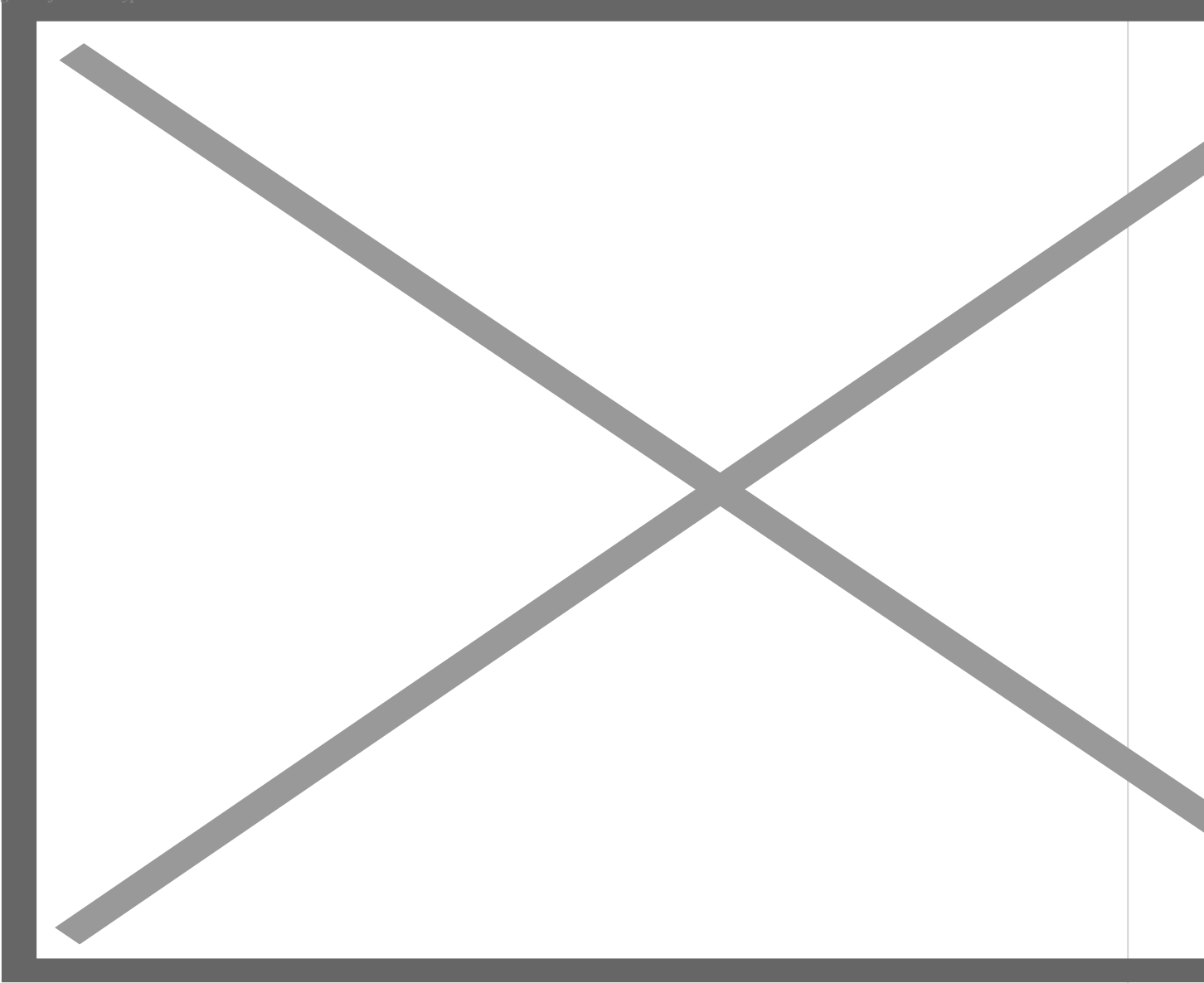


Polio epidemic declared in Gaza in latest sign of worsening health crisis

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Palestinian children are sitting on a street flooded with sewage water in Deir el-Balah, in the central Gaza Strip, on July 23. Polio was detected in multiple samples of Gaza's wastewater a week ago and now infectious disease experts suspect there are mild cases of the disease already in the population.

Majdi Fathi//NurPhoto via Getty Images

Gaza City, July 30 (RHC)--Gaza's health ministry has declared a polio epidemic across the Palestinian enclave, blaming Israel's devastating military offensive for the spread of the deadly virus.

In a statement on Telegram, the ministry on Monday said the situation "poses a health threat to the residents of Gaza and neighbouring countries" – the latest sign of a worsening public health emergency caused by Israel's genocidal war since October.

Calling the epidemic a "setback" to the global polio eradication programme, the ministry called for an "immediate intervention to end the [Israeli] aggression and find radical solutions" to lack of potable water and personal hygiene, damaged sewage networks and removal of tonnes of rubbish and solid waste.

Poliomyelitis, which is spread mainly through the fecal-oral route, is a highly infectious virus that can invade the nervous system and cause paralysis. Cases of polio have declined by 99 percent worldwide since 1988, thanks to mass vaccination campaigns, and efforts continue to eradicate it everywhere.

Earlier this month, Gaza's health ministry said it had detected "component poliovirus type 2" in coordination with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The virus was found in sewage "that collects and flows between the tents of the displaced," said the ministry.

Already scarce supplies of drinking water in the densely-populated Gaza Strip are at risk of being contaminated by the virus.

Over the weekend, the World Health Organization (WHO) said it was sending more than one million polio vaccines to Gaza to be administered over the coming weeks to prevent children from being infected after the virus was detected in sewage samples.

Israel's military, which said it has evidence of the "component polio virus type 2", said it would start offering the polio vaccine to soldiers in Gaza. Israel's war in Gaza has damaged and destroyed sewage and water systems, and sewage has spilled into the streets near some camps for the displaced Palestinians.

Last week, the UN reported that besides the detection of the polio virus, there has been a widespread increase in cases of Hepatitis A, dysentery and gastroenteritis as sanitary conditions deteriorate in Gaza.

"This is only the start of the wave of diseases the Gaza Strip is going to face," said Al Jazeera's Hind Khoudary, reporting from Deir-al Balah in central Gaza. "Palestinians have been living in makeshift tents without any bathrooms, without any hygiene, without access to water, sanitation. Sewage is everywhere," she said.

Dr Tanya Haj-Hassan, a paediatric intensive care physician, told Al Jazeera in an interview earlier this month that the presence of the polio virus in sewage was a "ticking time bomb".

"Normally if you have a case of polio, you're going to isolate them, you're going to make sure that they use a bathroom that nobody else uses, make sure that they're not in close proximity to other people, [but] that's impossible," she said.

“You have everybody clustering in refugee camps at the moment without vaccines for at least the past nine months, including children who would otherwise have been vaccinated for polio and adults who, in the setting of an outbreak, should receive a booster, including healthcare workers.”

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