

WHO facing near insurmountable challenges in Gaza aid delivery

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Geneva, January 11 (RHC)-- The UN health agency has deplored the lack of access to Gaza for the delivery of much-needed humanitarian assistance, amid intense bombardment in the southern part of the besieged Palestinian enclave.

“Delivering aid to Gaza continues to face near insurmountable challenges,” the World Health Organisation Director-General Tedros Ghebreyesus said during a news conference on Wednesday in Geneva.

“We have the supplies, the teams and the plans in place. What we don’t have is access,” he said, stressing that the UN and its partners remained “completely ready” to deliver assistance to Gaza Palestinians. Israeli authorities have repeatedly refused to allow UN aid teams to deliver desperately needed humanitarian relief inside Gaza, effectively cutting off hospitals and residents from lifesaving medical supplies.

“We call on Israel to approve requests from WHO and its partners to deliver humanitarian aid,” Ghebreyesus said.

Israel’s Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories, or COGAT, has repeatedly blamed the world body for failing to deliver supplies at a fast enough pace. Moshe Tetro, head of COGAT, on Wednesday denied any bottlenecks on the Israeli end preventing aid from reaching the enclave.

“The problem lies with the international organisations processing and receiving the aid,” he said, according to The Times of Israel.

Richard Peeperkorn, WHO representative for the Occupied Palestinian Territory, claimed instead that the UN has been operating within a “shrinking humanitarian space”. “There should be more avenues to get into Gaza, but also to work within Gaza,” he said, adding that humanitarian corridors were to be expected even in the absence of a ceasefire.

The UN health agency said six humanitarian missions to northern Gaza – where the situation is most dire amid a total collapse of the healthcare system – have been cancelled since December 26 due to the lack of necessary permissions to proceed safely.

“If you do not get a permission, you cannot move, and our requests were repeatedly rejected,” Peeperkorn said.

Only about a third of Gaza’s hospitals are functioning totally or partially WHO officials on Tuesday voiced concern about the possible collapse of hospital provision in southern and central Gaza, as fighting intensifies and hundreds of medical staff and patients flee medical facilities. “The international community must not allow this to happen in the middle and southern areas,” Peeperkorn said.

Three hospitals located near evacuation zones – European Gaza Hospital, Nasser Medical Complex and Al-Aqsa – are providing a lifeline to about two million people. On Wednesday, Al Jazeera correspondents reported explosions in front of the Al Aqsa Hospital in central Gaza. The area around the compound has come under intense fire in recent days.

Sean Casey, WHO emergency medical teams coordinator in Gaza, warned on Tuesday that Gaza cannot afford to lose more medical infrastructure. “We cannot lose these health facilities. They absolutely must be protected. This is the last line of secondary and tertiary healthcare that Gaza has – from the north to the south, it’s been dropping, hospital after hospital,” he said.

At least 23,357 people have been killed and more than 59,410 wounded in Israeli attacks on Gaza since October 7, according to Palestinian authorities. Significant damage has been inflicted upon critical infrastructure, including water purification systems.

Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO’s infectious disease epidemiologist expert, said the organisation detected a number of indicators – including respiratory illnesses and diarrhoea – that point to the spread of infectious diseases in Gaza.

“These are a manifestation of multiple diseases, but we can’t get to the bottom of it because we don’t have access to testing,” Van Kerkhove said. “By the time we identify the disease, it will be at a late stage,” she added.

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