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The health dimensions of violence in Palestine: a call to prevent genocide

Before October's escalation of violence, the effect of the Israeli siege of Gaza had already been described as a "slow-motion genocide".¹ Since Oct 7, 2023, Gaza and the West Bank have been subjected to intensified Israeli military and settler violence, triggered by attacks by Hamas in Israel. In response, international law scholars and practitioners, human rights organisations, and UN experts have emphasised the risk of Israel committing genocide, requested investigations, and have called on the international community to prevent genocide against

the Palestinian people.² Building on this, we highlight the health dimensions of violence resulting from the ongoing siege and attacks against Palestinians. We situate this violence in relation to the definition of genocide as described in Article 2 of the Genocide Convention, focusing on physical elements including killing, causing serious bodily or mental harm, creating life-threatening conditions, preventing births, and forcibly transferring children.³

In just over 9 weeks, more than 18 205 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, along with 265 people killed in the West Bank.⁴ Designated protected spaces such as hospitals and schools have not been spared.⁵ More than 49 500 people have been injured, many of whom are at severe risk of long-term disability or death.⁵ Repeated exposure to conflict and violence, including witnessing and experiencing housing demolition, combined with Israel's siege of Gaza since 2007, is already known to be associated with high levels of psychological distress among Palestinians.⁶ Exposure to violence, ongoing mass displacement (with almost 1.9 million internally displaced), and the destruction or damage of 60% of Gaza's housing, has the potential to exacerbate mental health issues.⁴ Life-sustaining infrastructure, including bakeries and water facilities, have also been targeted, rendering the entire Gaza population at risk of food insecurity, dehydration, and water-borne diseases.^{7,8} Health-care facilities in Gaza have been pervasively targeted, with each attack potentially constituting a war crime and posing a lasting threat to the viability of the health-care system.⁹ Hospital damage, alongside staff and supply shortages, hinder health care for all, including an estimated 50 000 pregnant women.⁷ The health effects on all Palestinian children, women, men, older people, people with disabilities, and people of marginalised identities are immense.

Continued Israeli violence coupled with a lack of immediate and independent humanitarian access will

exacerbate morbidity and mortality due to worsening health issues such as acute malnutrition, disease outbreaks, poor birth outcomes, progression of non-communicable diseases, and mental health problems.¹⁰ As public health and humanitarian professionals, we the authors state emphatically that the grave risk of genocide against the Palestinian people warrants immediate—and now overdue—action. In accordance with Article 8 of the Genocide Convention, we urge all signatory parties to the Convention to enforce an immediate and sustained ceasefire and to act to de-escalate the threat of further Israeli violence. This action is imperative to prevent acts of genocide. We also call on all parties to ensure that all Palestinians can fully realise their right to life, liberty, and security of person as protected under international law and detailed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

YB's spouse is employed by Elsevier as a Software Engineer. We declare no other competing interests.

Editorial note: The Lancet Group takes a neutral position with respect to territorial claims in the published text and institutional affiliations.

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There is no way to leave Gaza

On Oct 8, the second day of the ongoing aggression in the Gaza Strip, my father was supposed to have his chemotherapy diffuser pump removed at a local hospital in Gaza. Yet, due to the escalating danger, I had to remove it myself as I followed his doctor's instructions over the phone. Luckily enough, we managed to secure the necessary heparin injection from a nearby pharmacy. During the 5 years I have spent in medical school, I have never seen a chemotherapy diffuser pump, let alone learnt how to remove one. Diffuser pumps are supposed to be a common option for cancer patients who prefer to stay at home while receiving treatment, but patients from Gaza were only offered this option over the past 6 months during treatment visits to the West Bank.

Cancer patients have been subjected to restricted access to medical care since the start of the Gaza blockade in 2008, and only a few are allowed access to health care in the West Bank through a referral system by the Palestinian Ministry of Health.¹ Even now, I do not fully understand how I was able to remove the pump. I just had to.

My father has been receiving different treatment regimens for his cancer since 2021 and was doing so by travelling to the West Bank after applying for a permit to see his doctor for each appointment, which can take anywhere from a few days to several weeks to be approved. He was also supposed to have two oncological surgeries in October, 2023, but travel permits to the West Bank were suspended for everyone living in Gaza, including cancer patients, for an unknown period.² There is no way to leave for another country for treatment, the only border crossing there is, with Egypt, was closed for the first 20 days following Oct 7, and was later only opened in order for a small number of people in need of urgent medical care to leave, as the temporary ceasefire was agreed.

For the past 17 years, we have been trapped in an open-air prison, and for roughly 2 months now, this has been turned into a 7-mile wide, 25-mile long concentration camp. No water, food, fuel, or medical supplies were allowed into the Strip for the first 2 weeks after Oct 7, and no one was allowed out.³ Internet and cellular connection have been completely cut off,⁴ so I have to use my 15 years of experience as a survivor of four other aggressions to locate the sounds of bombardment, and if I am focused enough, identify the type of bomb being dropped and what it might have destroyed. I often ask myself, don't the Israel Defense Forces get bored? Or tired? Since the start of the war, there has been bombardment every single minute—bombing of a street, a hospital, a church, a mosque, a bakery, a house, a school, a group of children playing, people in a queue to get

goods from a market, people sleeping in a hospital yard. Every single minute someone is either killed or severely injured and hundreds of thousands of people are traumatised for life.⁵

Since the start of the war, I have been trying so hard not to speak or write about what is happening, just because doing so would make me think about it, and once I start thinking, I know I will be drawn into never-ending misery. Therefore, I will try as much as I can to stick to the facts and the facts only. I have lost a dear friend, who was a photojournalist. He was killed wearing his press vest while reporting on the ground. My best friend lost 30 members of her immediate family and two of her closest friends, yet she still reports on the situation from abroad. I was displaced three times within 2 days and ran away carrying my entire life in a backpack. Since I left, no one has been able to check on the area. All we know is that tonnes of explosives have landed there, so there is a high chance that my home no longer exists. Two of my friends lost their homes and have sought refuge in a hospital. That hospital has been threatened with bombardment, but they have nowhere else to go. Despite all this, I am one of the lucky few with a roof overhead and a bathroom shared with only 20 other people.

I declare no competing interests. Salam is a pseudonym used for safety. This testimony was originally shared with Mike Silva, a consultant surgeon who visited the Gaza Strip on Oct 23, 2023. Ayesha Musa and James Smith made small grammatical changes for clarity.

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