

MEDIA RELEASE

International, Israeli, Palestinian health workers call on Israeli Government to guarantee health workers protection

JERUSALEM, 15 March 2003 – In an unprecedented call for protection, international, Israeli and Palestinian aid agencies* joined together today to call upon the Government of Israel to ensure that its military respects the neutrality of all health personnel, services and property in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (oPt) including east Jerusalem. Since the start of the current conflict in September 2000, 25 Palestinian health workers, including ambulance drivers, doctors, nurses and medical volunteers, have been killed and 419 have been injured.

As a signatory to the 4th Geneva Convention, the Government of Israel has an internationally recognized obligation to ensure protected and unhindered access for all health workers operating in the oPt to enable them to continue providing much-needed emergency and essential medical services to the Palestinian population.

The conditions which health workers have been forced to work under since September 2000 - to provide care to the sick and injured in the oPt - are unacceptable. Israeli military attacks on health workers are on the increase. Numerous appeals and protests to the Israeli authorities at the highest levels over the past two years have come to nothing. What is even more disturbing is the lack of accountability within the Israeli military towards such actions. To date, no soldier has been tried when medical personnel have been killed or injured.

The latest health worker casualties were Munther el-Safadi (aged 25), who was killed, and his brother Dr. Ra'ed el-Safadi (aged 27), who was seriously wounded in the abdomen. Both were providing emergency care to the injured, in the street, on 19 February 2003 during the Israeli military's overnight attack on the heavily populated Shejaeya and Tuffah neighborhoods of Gaza City.

Previously, two Palestinian male nurses in an Al-Wafa Medical Rehabilitation Hospital ward in Gaza, 'Abdul Karim Lubbad (aged 22) and 'Omar al-Din Hassaan (aged 21), were jointly killed on 5 February 2003 by a single bullet fired by an Israeli sniper while they were attending to a paraplegic patient.

* *This statement is attributable to the following organisations: AM Qattan Foundation; the European Commission; the Friends of East Jerusalem Hospitals; the Health, Development, Information and Policy Institute; the Italian Cooperation; Médecins du Monde – France; Médecins du Monde – Greece, "Medecins sans Frontieres -Greece; Medical Aid for Palestinians – UK; MERLIN – UK; the Palestine Red Crescent Society; Physicians for Human Rights – Israel; Solidaridad Internacional; the Union of Health Work Committees, the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees; the United Nations Children's Fund; the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; the United Nations Population Fund; The Welfare Association; and the World Health Organisation.*

International aid agency workers have also been affected. In March 2002, Kamal Hamdan, a staff member of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) from Tulkarm refugee camp was shot and killed while traveling in a clearly-marked UNRWA ambulance that was transporting a patient to a hospital. On 19 February 2003, Israeli soldiers fired warning shots at a French medical team from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in the northern Gaza Strip. MSF teams had twice come under fire in Gaza in previous months.

Often verbally and physically abused, and humiliated at Israeli military roadblocks, health workers have witnessed the death of Palestinian patients due to time lost through delays at successive checkpoints. By the end of February 2003, 90 Palestinian patients had died at Israeli military checkpoints in the oPt. Over the past 16 months, 51 Palestinian women have given birth in ambulances and cars at checkpoints and 29 newborn babies have died at Israeli checkpoints.

Emergency medical services, such as those run by the Palestine Red Crescent Society and a number of health NGOs have been particularly targeted. There have been 234 attacks on ambulances (around 11 every month), of which 109 ambulances have been damaged and 27 totally destroyed. 773 violations of and restrictions on ambulance access to Palestinians in need of emergency medical attention have been recorded during the current crisis.

In addition, there have been 270 separate incidents where hospitals have come under Israeli military attack, including shelling and firing. The Israeli military has also temporarily occupied health clinics, and searched and detained staff. Vandalism and looting of health property and infrastructure has also occurred.

At this crucial time in the Middle East, international, Israeli and Palestinian aid agencies join together in reminding the Government of Israel of its obligation, in accordance with international humanitarian and human rights law, to protect health workers in their attempts to ensure basic preventative and curative care is available to the Palestinian population at all times.

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