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To: Health professionals
Copy: Campaign coordinators
From: Medical Office / East Mediterranean sub-regional team
Date: 5 April 2002

MEDICAL LETTER WRITING ACTION

Update on attacks on health personnel and disrupted health care

ISRAEL/OCCUPIED TERRITORIES/PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

[Further information on MDE 15/018/2002, 14 March 2002]

Keywords: killings / health professionals / access to medical care / medical neutrality

Summary

Since the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) attacks against Palestinian cities and towns escalated, there has been a major increase in deaths of Palestinians as a result of Israeli military action, including deaths of health personnel and those seeking medical care. The IDF have fired on vehicles trying to reach hospitals causing deaths and injuries, and doctors and other health workers have been killed by army gunfire while travelling in ambulances, in breach of international humanitarian standards. Further obstacles have also been placed in the way of Palestinian patients travelling to hospitals with delays at roadblocks or refusal of passage being imposed by Israeli soldiers. Breaches of humanitarian standards by Palestinians have also occurred. There has been a suicide bombing at a station of the Magen David Adom (MDA, Israeli equivalent of the Red Crescent Society) in Efrat, an Israeli settlement. Explosive materials were found in an ambulance of the Palestine Red Crescent Society; the PRCS called for an independent investigation of this incident.

Amnesty International continues to call urgently for the Israeli authorities to respect medical neutrality as set out in the Geneva Conventions of August 1949 and the 1977 Protocols Additional to the Geneva Conventions and to permit those in need of medical care to obtain it. It is also calling on Palestinian armed groups to end the practice of targeting civilians and to respect medical neutrality. Amnesty International is again urging health professional bodies to protest at these breaches and to reaffirm principles of both humanitarian law and medical ethics in the current conflict.

Recommended actions

Letters to the Israeli government

Please write letters on professional letterhead paper to the government members listed below

- o introducing yourself as a health professional concerned with human rights
- o expressing deep regret at the violation of the right to life

- o expressing serious concern about the closures and curfews in Palestinian areas and the restrictive travel limits imposed at Israeli checkpoints which have all prevented Palestinians from obtaining medical care
- o expressing alarm at IDF attacks on health workers and ambulances; you could also refer to the attack by a suicide bomber against members of the Magen David Adom in Efrat settlement on 31 March which you also vigorously oppose. [If you are writing to the Palestinian Authority you could mention that you are doing so.]
- o urging the Government to instruct the IDF to respect medical premises, vehicles and personnel, to ensure that people needing medical care are able to receive it and that provision is made for the burial of those killed in recent days
- o urging the Government to carry out investigations into the circumstances surrounding the killing of civilians and targeting of ambulances

Letters to the Israeli Medical Association

- o introducing yourself as a concerned health professional
- o expressing deep concern about the effect of current Israeli military action on health services and on the impeded access of Palestinians to health care in Israel and the Occupied Territories
- o noting your serious concerns about attacks by Israeli forces on Palestinian ambulances and medical personnel as well as an attack against a post of the Magen David Adom by a suicide bomber and the reported finding of explosive in a Palestine Red Crescent Society ambulance
- o urging the Association to use its good offices to press the Israeli government to protect medical personnel and to ensure that those seeking medical care have unrestricted access to clinics and hospitals
- o urging the Association to reaffirm the vital importance of maintaining respect for international humanitarian law and medical ethics

Letters to Palestinian addresses

To the Palestinian Authority

Please organize letters

- o introducing yourself as a health professional concerned with human rights
- o expressing deep regret at the violation of the right to life
- o expressing serious concern about the suicide attack by a Palestinian on 31 March against the Efrat station of the Magen David Adom, a medical post which should be respected under international humanitarian law
- o urging the Palestinian Authority to call for respect of the Geneva Conventions by all Palestinian groups

Letters to Hamas (an armed Palestinian group)

Please write letters to the addresses below

- o introducing yourself as a health professional concerned with human rights

o expressing deep regret at the violation of the right to life

o calling for Hamas to respect international humanitarian law and to cease attacks against Israeli civilians

Letters to your national professional bodies

Please write one letter per group to your professional bodies

o referring to your earlier letter (if you wrote one)

o attaching copies of the letters you wrote to the Israeli Medical Association and to the Palestinian Authority

Addresses

Prime Minister

Ariel Sharon
Prime Minister and Minister of Defence
Office of the Prime Minister
3 Kaplan Street, Hakiryia, Jerusalem 91007
Israel
Faxes: + 972 2 566 4838

Military Commander of the Central Division

Major-General Doron Almog
Israeli Defence Forces
West Bank, Central Area Command
64 Israeli Defence Forces
Military Post 01149, Israel
Fax: + 972 25305741

Military Commander of the Southern Division

Major-General Itzak Etan
Israeli Defence Forces
Gaza Strip, Military Post 01105
Erez Check Point
Israel
Fax: + 972 76741650/79902655

Israel Medical Association

Dr Yoram Blachar
President
Israel Medical Association
2 Twin Towers, 35 Jabotinsky St.
P.O.B. 3566, Ramat-Gan 52136
Israel
Fax: +972 3 575 16 16
E-mail: malke@ima.org.il

Minister of Health

Nissim Dahan
Minister of Health
Ministry of Health
2 Ben Taibai Street

PO Box 1176
Jerusalem 91010
Israel
Fax: + 972 26796491

Palestinian Authority

The national offices and structures of the Palestinian Authority (PA) are currently being demolished by the Israeli Defence Forces. The President of the PA, Yasser Arafat, is under house arrest in Ramallah. Letters to the territory of the PA may not be delivered. We therefore suggest that letters to the PA authorities be sent to the diplomatic addresses of the PA in your country.

Hamas

Letters go via Israel and are unlikely to reach the Hamas offices at the moment.

Shaikh Ahmed Yassin
Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas)
Gaza
Palestinian Authority
Fax: +972.8.2866990 (ask for fax)

Copies

Please send copies of your letters to the nearest diplomatic representatives of Israel and also to any of the following organizations:

Physicians for Human Rights – Israel
(PHR-IL)
PO Box 592
Tel Aviv 61004, Israel
E-mail: mail@phr.org.il
Web: <http://www.phr.org.il>

*Union of Palestinian Medical Relief
Committees (UPMRC)*
PO Box 51483
Jerusalem Via Israel
E-mail: mrs@upmrc.org
Web: <http://www.upmrc.org/>

Gaza Community Mental Health Programme
(GCMHP)
P.O. Box 1049, Shuhada St.
Gaza, Palestinian Authority
Tel: +972.7.282.40.73 / 286.59.49, Fax:
+972.7.282.57.20
E-mail: rana@gcmhp.net
Web: <http://www.gcmhp.net>

B'Tselem
8 HaTa'asiya St. (4th Floor),
Jerusalem 93420, Israel.
E-mail: mail@btselem.org
Web: <http://www.btselem.org/>

Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS)
PO Box 3637
Al-Bireh, Palestinian Authority
E-mail: Info@PalestineRCS.org
Web: <http://www.palestinercs.org/>

LAW Society
P.O.Box 20873, Jerusalem
Via Israel
E-mail: law@lawsociety.org
Web: <http://www.lawsociety.org/>

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Update on attacks on health personnel and disrupted health care ISRAEL/OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

Introduction

On 14 March 2002, Amnesty International (AI) issued a short report on the situation of health personnel, ambulances and patients in the Occupied Territories since Israeli military incursions into Palestinian refugee camps at the end of February 2002. AI said that the problems faced by Palestinians in gaining access to health care since the beginning of the al-Aqsa *intifada* had worsened in recent weeks as Israeli forces targeted or impeded ambulance access. AI called for the Israeli authorities to implement and observe international human rights and humanitarian law. In particular, AI urged the authorities to ensure that patients seeking medical care are not attacked; that ambulances and other vehicles attending the sick and wounded are not attacked; that medical personnel engaged solely in collecting and caring for the sick and wounded are not attacked; that hospitals, clinics and emergency first aid posts are not attacked; and that Israeli checkpoint staff are provided with clear instructions on their obligations to ensure that Palestinian health services are not impeded.

At the end of March 2002, an already difficult situation deteriorated when Ramallah was occupied by Israeli military forces. Subsequently Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, Tulkaram, Qalqiliya, Jenin and Nablus have been occupied.

The occupations have imposed severe conditions on the occupants of these population centres. Electricity and water have been cut off, as a result of deliberate action of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) as well as incidental damage inflicted by heavy military vehicles such as tanks and armoured personnel carriers. Access to food, water and medical supplies is being impeded and garbage collection has stopped. Those leaving or returning to their homes are at risk of being shot by Israeli soldiers. Widad Safran, a Palestinian woman in her fifties, was shot dead on 2 April when she walked from the Ramallah hospital towards her home. She had been at the hospital to have a plaster cast removed from her leg following a fracture. Medics who recovered her body were also reportedly fired upon. She was one of some 20 bodies at Ramallah hospital which were rapidly buried during a brief interval in the curfew on 2 April. Over the past week, the dead cannot be buried because ambulances are not permitted to collect the bodies and risked being fired on if they tried. In some cases families are living with the bodies of relatives remaining in their homes.

Health personnel

Health workers have continued to be injured or killed. In an attack in Jenin on 2 April Fadwa Abdullah, a 27-year-old nurse, was killed when tanks fired on her house. It is not clear why the house was fired on. According to the Palestine Red Crescent Society, two of their staff, Ahlam Nassir and Basem Rassim, were wounded during the Israeli attack on Ramallah. Other medical and paramedical staff have been arrested. On 2 April, the president of the PRCS, Younis al-Khatib, and eight medics travelling in three ambulances in Ramallah were stopped and forced to kneel on the ground in the rain. They were released from detention uncharged later in the day. Some PRCS medics remain in custody.

On 4 April the PRCS reported that the PRCS maternity hospital in Ramallah/AI-Bireh was raided by members of the IDF and that two doctors, two nurses and a hospital worker were blindfolded and taken away.

Since the beginning of the Al-Aqsa *intifada* 17 doctors and nurses have been killed, according to Palestinian NGOs.

Disruption of health care services

In areas under Israeli military occupation

The major population centres under Israeli military occupation are suffering massive disruption of medical and health care services. Personnel and ambulances are barely able to move without the risk of being shot at. Patients have also been killed or wounded while seeking medical care, sometimes suffering from delays imposed by Israeli soldiers staffing checkpoints through which Palestinians must pass en route to hospitals. A pregnant woman trying to reach hospital in Bethlehem on 2 April was reported to have been stopped at an Israeli checkpoint where she subsequently gave birth. Her baby died. Similar experiences of pregnant women have been reported previously. In Ramallah, a 39-year-old seriously disabled woman, who choked while she was being fed, died after an ambulance called by the family was stopped en route by Israeli soldiers; attempts by the family to save her failed. To AI's knowledge, her body remains in the family's three-roomed house.

The PRCS reports that seven of its ambulances have been destroyed or damaged beyond repair since 29 March. Amnesty International is calling on the Israeli authorities to immediately cease all attacks on health personnel and ambulances and to remove all obstacles to Palestinians seeking prompt access to health care.

Outside the areas of Israeli military occupation

In Gaza, a 50-year-old man, Jaber al-Nabahin, from Bureij refugee camp (Gaza strip) went to the local hospital complaining of breathing difficulties. It was decided to transfer him to a hospital in Gaza City, but the ambulance he was travelling in was delayed for two hours at an Israeli military roadblock. Jaber al-Nabahin subsequently died. Throughout the Occupied Territories access to medical care is impeded by Israeli military roadblocks and by other physical obstacles on roads.

Breaches of medical neutrality

Attacks on ambulances and health personnel breach the standards laid out in the Geneva Conventions. Both the PRCS and the ICRC have protested at persistent breaches of medical neutrality. On 5 April the ICRC announced that it was "obliged to limit its movement in the West Bank to a strict minimum". It said: "Over the past two days, ICRC staff in Bethlehem have been threatened at gun point, warning shots have been fired at ICRC vehicles in Nablus and Ramallah, two ICRC vehicles were damaged by IDF tanks in Tulkarem and the ICRC premises in Tulkarem were broken into. This behaviour is totally unacceptable, for it jeopardises not only the life-saving work of emergency medical services, but also the ICRC's humanitarian mission."

While most of the reports of violations of medical neutrality reaching Amnesty International involve actions by the IDF, there have also been two incidents involving Palestinians. The first is the alleged misuse of a Palestine Red Crescent Society ambulance to transport explosives. The ambulance was stopped at one of many checkpoints the ambulance passed through and an explosive device was found by Israeli soldiers searching the back of the vehicle. It was detonated in the presence of a representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross. The ICRC said on 29 March it was "shocked and dismayed" by the reports of explosive material being found in a Palestine Red Crescent Society ambulance and condemned abuse of an ambulance and of the Red Crescent emblem. The PRCS president vehemently denied that it had willingly carried the explosive and said that it had been planted to discredit the Society. The PRCS called for an independent inquiry into the incident; AI does not have information about the outcome of such an inquiry at time of writing.

On 31 March, a suicide bomber attacked the station of the Magen David Adom (MDA) in Efrat, an Israeli settlement near Bethlehem. Three MDA personnel were wounded, one gravely. Other civilians also suffered injuries. Such an attack breaches the prohibition under international humanitarian standards of attacks targeted at civilians and medical facilities.

International standards

On 2 April 2002, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies “urgently and solemnly appeal[ed] to all those employing armed force to respect international humanitarian law, and in particular the Fourth Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of 1949 and the rules governing the conduct of hostilities.”

Amnesty International and many other non-governmental organizations have repeatedly made similar calls. (See the AI statement to the UN Commission on Human Rights, 2 April, MDE 15/027/2002 <http://web.amnesty.org/web/news.nsf/WebAll/230741FF93144C3B80256B89003D10D3>.)

Conclusion

The present situation reflects a deepening disregard for international humanitarian law. AI is calling again for the Israeli authorities:

- o to ensure that patients seeking medical care and those who provide such are not attacked;
- o to ensure that ambulances and other vehicles attending the sick and wounded are not attacked or prevented from reaching people in urgent need of medical care;
- o to guarantee that hospitals, clinics and emergency first aid posts are not attacked;
- o to provide Israeli checkpoint staff with clear instructions on their obligations to ensure that Palestinian health services or those seeking medical care are not impeded.

Amnesty International is also calling for an end to attacks by Palestinian armed groups against civilians and for the neutrality of medical posts and vehicles to be respected by Palestinian combatants.