

Report shows Israeli blockade inflaming Gaza's COVID-19 crisis

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**Palestinians wait to receive aid amid the coronavirus outbreak at a UN-run school in Gaza City.
(Photo: Mohammed Salem / Reuters)**

Gaza City, February 4 (RHC)-- Israel's devastating 13-year siege of the Gaza Strip is intensifying the coronavirus crisis in the Palestinian enclave, threatening the lives of its nearly two million inhabitants, a new study warns.

In a report released on Wednesday, a group of international researchers described "challenges over access to healthcare and other essential resources, as well as the economic toll the virus has placed on individuals and their families." The study focused on the spread of public health information about COVID-19, the measures taken to curb its spread, as well as the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic.

According to a study conducted by the UK-based University of Bath and the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, in cooperation with IOD PARC consulting organization, Palestinians are aware of the risks and understand the importance of public health measures to reduce the number of infections, but many perceive the preventative measures as more challenging than the disease itself.

As a result, many view the public health measures "as more challenging than the disease itself," the statement said. Such challenges have been exacerbated by the ongoing air, land and naval blockade imposed by Israel, described in the report as "the dominant factor in the worsening humanitarian situation...[resulting in] the ill-preparedness of the local healthcare system, economy and communities to cope."

"Israel's blockade has devastated the economy in Gaza, and this is having a major impact on the ability of people to comply with lockdown measures when doing so means losing their already limited sources of income," lead researcher Caitlin Procter from the European University Institute in Florence said.

"Many do not seek medical treatment for other health conditions, driven by fear of being infected by COVID, and the severe loss of income that a diagnosis would incur. For the same reason, some healthcare workers were reluctant to treat COVID patients, and many individuals with symptoms do not go for testing."

In addition to the ongoing blockade, high unemployment rates, UN funding cuts, and Palestinian political divisions are factors contributing to Gaza's moribund economy. "All of these factors have been affecting the economic situation of the population. The outbreak of the pandemic and the rules of 'staying at home' leave many, including day labourers, unable to provide for their families," al-Ruzzi said.

Gaza's healthcare system is in shambles and its war-battered residents are especially vulnerable as they have lived under an Israeli-Egyptian blockade since 2007. The air, land and sea siege has restricted the entry of essential resources such as healthcare equipment, medication and building materials, among others.

Effective social-distancing measures and quarantine procedures have been extremely challenging to implement, researchers said. According to the latest WHO estimates from January 31, there have been 51,312 confirmed cases and 522 deaths from COVID-19 in Gaza since reporting began in July 2020.

With the number of cases rising, health officials in Gaza have warned they can no longer carry out coronavirus tests because of a lack of kits. Last month, they called for urgent action to provide necessary equipment needed by the enclave's only laboratory able to analyse coronavirus test samples.

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees has warned the Gaza Strip's health system could collapse if the number of cases continues to rise. Israel has faced mounting global pressure, including from the UN, to help Palestinians living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to gain access to vaccines.

While many countries around the world have started vaccine campaigns – with Israel in the lead worldwide – Palestinians in Gaza and the occupied West Bank are still waiting their turn. The Palestinian

Authority (PA) this week started COVID vaccinations in the West Bank after receiving 2,000 doses from Israel, officials said. The Moderna vaccines are the first batch of the promised 5,000 shots to be delivered by Israel to inoculate medical workers.

But in Gaza and the West Bank, there are more than 4.5 million Palestinians who do not have access to the vaccine. International actors and the World Health Organization should campaign to make the vaccine accessible to the Palestinians and develop plans to enhance the capacity of the health sector in Gaza, al-Ruzzi said. “The pandemic clearly shows us how vulnerable the public health system is. The work of local and international actors is critical here,” he said.

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