

World Health Organization says disease could kill more in Gaza than bombs

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Geneva, November 29 (RHC)-- More people could die from disease than from bombings in the Gaza Strip if the health and sanitation systems are not repaired, the World Health Organization (WHO) has said.

Critical infrastructure in the besieged territory has been crippled by fuel and supply shortages and targeted attacks on hospitals and United Nations facilities since Israel launched strikes on Gaza on October 7th.

“Eventually we will see more people dying from disease than from bombardment if we are not able to put back together this health system,” said Margaret Harris, a spokesperson for the WHO, speaking at a briefing in Geneva on Tuesday.

She described the collapse of al-Shifa Hospital in northern Gaza as a “tragedy” and voiced concern about the detention of some of its medical staff by Israeli forces who took over the complex earlier this month. She also repeated concerns about a rise in outbreaks of infectious diseases in Gaza, particularly diarrhoeal diseases.

Citing a United Nations report on the living conditions of displaced residents in northern Gaza, she said: “[There are] no medicines, no vaccination activities, no access to safe water and hygiene and no food.”

All key sanitation services have ceased operating in Gaza, which raises the prospect of an enormous surge of gastrointestinal and infectious diseases among the local populations – including cholera.

For Gaza’s 2.3 million residents, half of whom are children, finding drinkable water has become close to impossible. The WHO has recorded more than 44,000 cases of diarrhoea and 70,000 acute respiratory infections, but real numbers may be significantly higher.

The UN health agency said it was extremely concerned that rains and floods during the approaching winter season will make an already dire situation even worse.

James Elder, a spokesperson from the UN children’s agency in Gaza, told reporters by video link that hospitals were full of children with war wounds and gastroenteritis from drinking dirty water. “They don’t have access to safe water and it’s crippling them,” he said.

If nothing changes, “there will be more and more people falling sick and the risk of major outbreaks will increase dramatically”, Richard Brennan, the regional emergency director for the Eastern Mediterranean region at WHO, told Al Jazeera earlier this month.

Despite the temporary truce agreement between Israel and Hamas, which was extended by two days just as it was set to expire on Tuesday morning, the Hamas-run Ministry of Health said no fuel had arrived for generators at hospitals in the territory’s north.

UN official Tor Wennesland warned the humanitarian situation “remains catastrophic.” It “requires the urgent entry of additional aid and supplies in a smooth, predictable, and continuous manner to alleviate the unbearable suffering of Palestinians in Gaza,” the UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process said.

Gaza City Mayor Yahya al-Siraj said that without fuel, the territory could not pump clean water or clear waste accumulating in the streets, warning of a potential public health “catastrophe”.

Clean-up was under way at al-Shifa, which is Gaza’s largest hospital. “We hope it can soon resume its activities,” said Gaza health ministry spokesman Mahmud Hammad.

Israeli bombardment has killed more than 14,800 Palestinians, including 6,150 children and more than 4,000 women, according to health authorities in the enclave.



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