

International Development Committee

House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA

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From Sarah Champion MP, Chair

The Rt Hon Lord Cameron
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
By email

17 January 2024

Dear Foreign Secretary,

Healthcare situation in Gaza

Thank you for your letter of 5 December 2023. It is reassuring to hear that the Government shares our concerns about the devastating humanitarian situation in Gaza and we welcome your commitment to engage with us on this crucial issue.

Sadly, the situation in Gaza since we last spoke has worsened dramatically. On 9 January, we took oral evidence from three organisations on the frontlines of this tragedy: the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Medical Aid for Palestinians and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society. We once again pay tribute to the heroic work that their staff and all frontline health workers are undertaking in the most brutal of conditions. We are especially devastated to hear that since we last spoke with UNRWA, a further 44 of their colleagues have been killed in the pursuit of helping others. We also pay tribute to the four workers of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society who were killed last week when their ambulance was hit by a missile.

All three organisations were unanimous in their evidence: the humanitarian situation in Gaza is now beyond catastrophic. Health care is in ruins. Over one third of Gaza's hospitals are unable to function and where services can be provided, there are shortages of the most basic equipment, such as anaesthetic and hospital beds. Our witnesses explained how innocent civilians have had to undergo amputations without any pain medication; we heard that in some cases, hospital floors have become operating tables. Where hospitals can function, demand far exceeds supply. UN OCHA figures show that occupancy rates among hospitals in Gaza sit at approximately 206 per cent in inpatient departments and 250 per cent in intensive care units. Every hospital in Gaza, whether it is able to function effectively or not, faces shortages of fuel, electricity and clean water.

While the medical infrastructure in Gaza tries its best to cope under the weight of demand and a lack of resource, witnesses told us that the nature of the healthcare crisis in the region is growing in dangerous ways. A group of UK doctors, who with the support of Medical Aid for Palestinians recently travelled to Gaza to participate in the healthcare response, reported seeing visibly emaciated and malnourished patients every day. Confirming the fears of the World Health Organisation, witnesses told us that

increasing levels of malnutrition in Gaza was no longer a threat, but a reality. This is especially dangerous for the region's most vulnerable groups, including pregnant women, children and people with pre-existing health conditions.

The challenges posed by the healthcare situation in Gaza are not only immediate. Gaza's commercial and agricultural sectors have been eviscerated by the conflict and the trickle of food aid that passes through lengthy border checks is nowhere near the volume needed to feed the population. Farmers in Gaza have missed three months of growing season and evidence gathered by the World Health Organisation suggests that famine may be inevitable. Disease, which never trails far behind hunger, is spreading rapidly. Our witnesses said that there are approximately 450,000 cases of infectious diseases in Gaza today. The spread of disease is exacerbated by overcrowded hospitals and shelters, low levels of access to clean water and the absence of basic sanitation. If disease and malnutrition continue to rise, its effect on Gaza's future generations will be grave.

Despite the scale of the challenge they face, healthcare professionals continue to deliver vital and lifesaving services whilst they too live in a warzone. Dr Ghada Al Jadba, the UN's Chief of Health in Gaza, told us how her workers were going hungry, choosing to feed their children over themselves with what little food they had available. Those who had lost homes considered themselves lucky that they had not lost limb or life and too many had lost family members. Even at work, medical staff are not safe from danger. We are disgusted to hear that medical sites and vehicles, including those bearing the universally-recognised red crescent of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society and the blue logo of the UN, continue to be hit by airstrikes and shelling. International humanitarian law clearly states that health establishments, including hospitals, should not be attacked. Medical units assigned to medical purposes must also be respected and protected in all circumstances. The evidence we have received suggests this has not been the case.

We welcome the Government's commitment of an additional £60 million of humanitarian aid to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, but we share our witnesses concerns that this aid may not be getting through to the people who need it most. No aid whatsoever, our witnesses said, is reaching the northern region of Gaza, where many ill and vulnerable people are stranded. The aid that reaches Gaza's southern and central regions is a fraction of what is required. In November, we heard how extensive border checks at Rafah held up aid convoys and strangled the flow of necessary humanitarian assistance into the region. We are appalled to hear that this remains the case.

As our session came to a close, we asked our witnesses what steps the UK Government could take to help address this desperate and devastating situation. We therefore would appreciate urgent clarify on the matters below.

- What steps is the Government taking to advocate for the protection of healthcare facilities and workers in Gaza?
- What steps is the Government taking to support the provision of emergency medical assistance, including trained medics and equipment for field hospitals, to the region?

- What steps is the Government taking to ensure that necessary long-term support for those in Gaza, such as psycho-social care, is not lost amid the need for immediate medical provision?
- On the subject of UK-provided humanitarian aid specifically:
 - How much aid provided for by UK Government funding has entered Gaza since 7 October?
 - How much aid provided for by UK Government funding has been turned back at the Gaza border, and for what reasons?
 - Has aid provided for by UK Government funding been distributed fully and if so, by whom?
 - What steps is the Government taking to ensure the aid it has provided for is distributed in accordance with humanitarian principles?

For those of us on the Committee, the evidence we heard on 9 January was among the most powerful, heart-breaking contributions we have heard during our time as MPs. We simply cannot comprehend what those in Gaza, especially those working on the frontline providing healthcare services, must endure each day. And yet they continue on. So we must also continue to do our best to alleviate humanitarian suffering in that region.

I would welcome your response to this letter by Friday 26 January and will publish that response in the usual way.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'S', on a light blue background.

Sarah Champion MP
Chair of the International Development Committee