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Gaza's health and humanitarian situation remains fragile

[Jan McGirk](#)

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are recovering from the 3-week Israeli assault on the isolated enclave, which injured thousands of civilians and damaged key medical facilities. Jan McGirk reports.

The medical system inside the besieged Gaza Strip has managed to avoid total collapse, although casualty units underwent enormous strain last month during the Israeli military assault.

Emergency medical supplies have recently reached hospitals, and volunteer teams of skilled foreign doctors from places as disparate as Jordan, Argentina, and Greece, along with several Arab-Israelis from Physicians for Human Rights, are helping tend the wounded, even though spare parts for essential medical equipment and ventilators are still scarce. Although 638 patients with severe injuries have been evacuated for specialist treatment abroad, thousands of patients remain.

22 days of bombardment by Israeli fighter aircraft, warships, and tanks had stretched Gaza's hospitals nearly to breaking point, but weeks after hostilities eased on Jan 18, help is now getting through for the 5390 Gazans injured during the Israeli military assault. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, women and children (younger than 18 years) comprised half of the wounded, and about 12% will face a lifetime of disability. Of 1380 Palestinians killed, 431 were children (see [webappendix](#)). In addition, since Dec 27, 2008, three Israelis were killed by rockets and mortars fired by Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip. Eleven Israeli soldiers were killed and 340 were wounded during the invasion.

Not included in the Gaza tallies are the Palestinian patients with chronic conditions or obstetric cases who died from lack of access to medical treatment during the recent crisis. More than 280 such deaths have been recorded since the Gaza blockade was tightened 19 months ago. There have also been several deaths after children touched unexploded ordnance or were killed on rooftops by Israel's drone aircraft, which still patrolled the skies during the ceasefire. According to an initial assessment by Care International, 499 of 525 (95%) random families polled reported increased fearfulness in children who have endured nightly bombings. Symptoms ranged from night terrors to bedwetting. Psychosocial counselling will be essential for this broken generation. At the moment, mental-health medications are in short supply.

The statistics in the medical sector are grim. Medical staff were caught in the fray and at least 16 health professionals died on duty, with a further 25 injured. Some 15 ambulances and 40 health facilities were damaged or destroyed during the assault.

Al-Wafa hospital, the only one in Gaza that treats amputees for rehabilitation, was shelled and damaged severely. Paraplegic patients and others with spinal injuries were wheeled away from shards of flying glass in the smouldering wards. Many more amputees will need to be fitted for prosthetic limbs in the coming months and will require physiotherapy. Al Quds hospital was also shelled repeatedly, and had to be evacuated. Bombs hit the US\$8 million biomedical laboratory at the Islamic University, destroying molecular biology equipment that was crucial for genetic analysis and diagnostics, and the medical library was ruined.

Human-rights activists are investigating accounts of witnesses that the Israeli Army denied medical aid to the wounded in Gaza and prevented ambulances from reaching them, as well as five incidents of firing on civilians carrying white flags. Israeli Government sources insist that their troops did their best to avoid civilian casualties and blame Hamas for hiding behind human shields.

UN officials contend that the 120 or so lorry loads of humanitarian aid allowed in per day provide less than a quarter of what is needed by Gaza's stricken population of 1.4 million.



[Full-size image \(39K\)](#) Getty Images

Jabalia, Gaza Strip on Jan 19

After the prolonged blitz, many Gazan neighbourhoods were flattened and resembled an earthquake zone. A team of physicians from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), who had been held up for 10 days at the Egyptian border, responded in exactly the same way they had after a major quake in the Himalayas in 2005. MSF doctors assembled a sterile inflatable surgical unit, with its own water supply and air conditioning, to treat septic abdominal wounds and do secondary surgeries on amputees and crush injuries.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that unconventional weapons may have exacerbated injuries inside the Gaza Strip. Moustapha Barghouti, a Palestinian politician who accompanied 17 Jordanian physicians to set up a field hospital in Gaza City, noted how "severe burns penetrated to the bone and left huge holes". He added: "One doctor told me he'd used sand to treat the burning flesh because nothing else would stop it." Up to 10 days after initial treatment, some patients with burns experienced unexpected deterioration due to kidney or liver damage. Investigations are underway to determine whether white phosphorus or tungsten in the shrapnel caused these unusual chemical reactions.

WebExtra Content

Webappendix



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