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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Iranian Elite Research Center, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[26 May 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Pregnant Women in Gaza

The number of people in need of medical care in Gaza is rapidly increasing with every passing day, but access to healthcare is becoming more and more difficult, if not impossible. At the time of writing, thousands of Palestinians have been killed and injured. In addition to injuries caused by the ongoing hostilities, fast-spreading diseases and catastrophic levels of food insecurity resulting in starvation add to the numbers of people in need of medical treatment. At the same time, the health system in Gaza has all but collapsed: only a third of hospitals are functioning, and then only partially. For the most part, medical services, including surgical operations, are provided without any basic resources such as clean water, electricity, or essential medical supplies such as anaesthetics. This has had catastrophic repercussions for prenatal care and infant and maternal health, with just two hospitals in the whole of Gaza still providing maternity services; an average of 180 women give birth every day amidst a sharp increase in obstetric complications, infections, and malnutrition.

Hospitals continue to face serious shortages of electricity, medication, medical equipment, food, and personnel due to Occupying Power restrictions on aid entering and moving freely and safely around Gaza, significantly compromising the provision of essential care. This situation is exacerbated by substantial damage to hospital infrastructure and facilities. Continuous airstrikes and military ground operations have also led to the evacuation of healthcare personnel and patients, and restricted their access to hospitals.

In Gaza, pregnant women and mothers are engaged in a battle for survival whilst struggling to protect and nourish themselves and their babies. International organizations are sounding the alarm on the severe effects nearly six months of conflict have had on these Palestinian women, especially with the critical shortages of food, water, healthcare, and the threat of imminent famine. Many Palestinians are dying not just from bombardment, but also from starvation. Women who are breastfeeding, which is the main way to feed babies without access to formula, are advised to drink 16 cups of water a day, but finding clean water in Gaza is a major problem. For Safe Birth in the State of Palestine, providing medical care to women who simply need sustenance has been one of its largest hurdles.

Pregnant women in Gaza face hunger, bombardment, displacement and the constant threat of death or illness from injuries, infections or disease. Many women have had to give birth without any form of medical aid and there are credible reports of women forced to undergo C-sections without anesthesia. The bombardments, damaged or non-functioning health facilities, massive levels of displacement, collapsing water and electricity supplies as well as restricted access to food and medicines, are severely disrupting maternal, newborn, and child health services.

Pregnant women are not receiving adequate nutrition and health care, putting their lives at risk, and all children under 5 — 335,000 — are at high risk of severe malnutrition, placing a whole generation in danger of suffering from stunting, which causes irreparable physical and cognitive impairments. World Health Organization (WHO) surveillance reveals a reality we have feared since this latest escalation: high rates of infectious diseases. The immediate concerns include open wounds, respiratory tract infections, viral and bacterial and fungal infections, and diarrheal diseases. The risk of further spread is worsened by overcrowding, inadequate water and sanitation, and severe constraints for coordinated and sustained health system response, including a severe shortage of medicines and surgical supplies.

Doctors have reported that beyond facing starvation, dehydration, and direct exposure to armed conflict, stress and shock are causing some pregnant women to experience premature labor in a context where emergency care is beyond reach, often resulting in the death of their babies before reaching full term. This tragic outcome can be attributed to the traumatic experiences of witnessing their homes bombed, experiencing displacement and fear, and the wholesale destruction of Gaza's healthcare system. Pregnant women and newborn babies have repeatedly been forced to evacuate hospitals and aid workers have been reporting a major increase in premature births due to the extreme levels of stress.

Recommendation

In the occupied Palestinian territories, the occupying power has an obligation to ensure medical supplies to the fullest extent of its means, in particular if the resources of the Occupied Palestinian Territory are inadequate. If the occupying power itself is unable to provide medical supplies for the population, it must allow for and facilitate with all means at its disposal the passage of humanitarian relief. The occupying power also has an obligation to ensure and maintain medical establishments and services, including by implementing measures against infectious diseases and epidemics, and to allow medical personnel to carry out their duties. This obligation entails that, at the very least, the occupying power refrain from interfering with the functioning of hospitals. If the medical services are inadequate, the occupying power must, in cooperation with the local authorities, take all measures in its power to ensure their proper functioning to meet the needs of the local population. As explained in a previous legal update, Occupying Power is bound by the law of occupation in Gaza, and the scope of its obligations under this body of law has expanded as it has gained firmer control over the Strip with a significant ground presence.

We urge the Human Rights Council to remind international obligations of states to Occupying power and call for an immediate cease fire. We believe that what is going in Gaza is genocide and needs for an urgent international action.

Caspian International Institute for Development and Peace NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.