

Israel News

Without Equipment, Staff, or Electricity: Hospitals in Southern Gaza Strip Overwhelmed by Scale of Wounded and Ill

Sunday 17 December 2023, by [KHOURY Jack](#) (Date first published: 6 December 2023).

Doctors from hospitals in Khan Yunis and Rafah tell Haaretz of deteriorating conditions, lack of beds and supplies, and the potential for outbreak of diseases that could cause the death toll to skyrocket. If evacuation looms, doctors ask: 'Where would we go? Where can we evacuate the patients to?'

Displaced Palestinian children walk on the grounds of the Nasser Hospital, where they are sheltering, a few weeks ago. Credit: MAHMUD HAMS - AFP

Holding a conversation with anyone at a southern Gaza Strip hospital has become a nearly impossible mission in the past two days. The frequent disconnections of the internet and telephone service leave no chance for direct communication, and one of the few ways to talk is through WhatsApp chats - where hours can pass until the other side can respond.

Dr. Ahmad, a surgeon at Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis and a local resident, has been working at the hospital for several days straight - since combat resumed on Friday morning - and hardly manages to communicate with his family. He asked to speak with Haaretz under an alias.

South Gaza's horror scenario: 18,000 people per square km without water or power

'We can't force our way in': The Red Cross confronts Israeli anger over hostages

Israeli army thrusts into southern Gaza and closes in on its main target: Hamas' Sinwar

"I have been living in an area in the city which until the war was considered the safest. We never felt threatened, nor did we feel any threat in previous rounds." Two days ago, his family received notice that they must evacuate from their homes. They left to nearby Rafah, and Ahmad remained at the hospital.

A Palestinian cancer patient is assisted at Nasser hospital in Khan Yunis, in the southern Gaza Strip, last month. Credit: MOHAMMED SALEM/ REUTERS

"I don't know if I'll return to my home, and if I'll even find it standing," he says. When asked about the situation at the hospital, he manages to reply only several hours later. "I just left the operating room. Someone hurt in the bombings. I operated on him to stop the bleeding. We barely found threads for sutures."

He says that the hospital lacks "everything. [There is hardly any drinking water, food is given once a day](#), there's no power. We release many wounded people who need to stay hospitalized because we have nowhere to put them."

Palestinians fleeing the Israeli ground offensive arrive in Rafah, Gaza Strip, Tuesday.Credit: Hatem Ali /AP

Nasser Hospital holds 364 beds, and normally stands at 70 to 80 percent occupancy. The [massive evacuation of residents from the north](#) of the strip turned the normally difficult situation into a catastrophe. Some aid organizations erected tents on the compound grounds, opening makeshift wards.

The hospital currently holds 500 beds, and Dr. Ahmad says the immediate need is for over a thousand. “Those arriving at the hospital compound think they reached a refugee city,” he describes.

“People huddle in the wards, [whether ill or refugees](#). Many suffer from respiratory difficulties due to a lack of ventilation and due to the crowding. Many children have diarrhea. Infants crawl on the floor with no one to care for them. It was clear to us that the lack of equipment and lack of hygiene, in addition to the horrible overcrowding, will lead to the spread of disease and infections that would only make the situation worse.”

Children wait for lentil soup on a rainy day at Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis, last month.Credit: BASSAM MASOUD/ REUTERS

Ahmad described a case where he and his colleagues couldn’t save a man severely wounded by shrapnel due to the poor conditions. “He suffered from pulmonary bleeding. We had to do a lifesaving procedure of intubating his lungs to remove fluids. There was nowhere to lay him down, there was simply no bed, and a few minutes later the man died.”

Apart from the severe lack of medications, essential supplies, and diesel to provide power, hospitals in the southern Gaza Strip also suffer from staff shortages. According to data from the Hamas health ministry, over 280 medical staff members have been killed since the outbreak of the war. In addition, many staff members living in the north or evacuated from their homes can’t reach work reliably.

Palestinians take shelter in the Nasser hospital during ongoing Israeli bombardment in Khan Yunis, Gaza Strip, last month.Credit: Fatima Shbair /AP

The Physicians for Human Rights organization is monitoring the situation and says that the hospitals in the south of the Gaza Strip are struggling to handle the influx of patients received from hospitals that have ceased operations in the north.

The increased ground operations in the south of the Strip and particularly in Khan Younis, the organization says, may cut off tens of thousands from health services and access to the European and Nasser hospitals in the city. Even so, most of the 1.8 million displaced people in the Strip have sought shelter in its southern half, where they live without enough food or potable water.

A displaced Palestinian girl stands outside her family tent where they take shelter at Nasser hospital in Khan Yunis, last week.Credit: SALEH SALEM/ REUTERS

“We’ve gone through so many crises and rounds, but we’ve never experienced something like this,” says Dr. Yusef Al Qaed, Director of the Khan Yunis European Hospital. In an interview to Radio a-Shams he said that his hospital, too, has become a place of refuge for many.

“The hospital normally holds 240 beds and we now have 900 patients. We erected tent encampments at the hospital front entrance to add beds, and converted wings of two schools adjacent to the hospital into inpatient wards. We put beds in the outpatient wards as well, and even rooms intended for X-rays.”

Dr. Al Qaed, too, [warns of the spread of disease](#), saying that the hospital has already diagnosed cases of meningitis and also viral ailments causing high fevers, shortness of breath, diarrhea, and liver-damaging conditions - all due to the overcrowding at the compound.

The bodies of Palestinians, who were killed during Israeli strikes on Ma'an school east of Khan Yunis, are transported for burial, Tuesday. Credit: IBRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA/ REUTERS

"At the beginning of the war, our area was defined as safe," he says. "Now we're deep inside the campaign, and I don't know if we'll reach the stage where the whole hospital is evacuated. But if they evacuated patients from the north to the south, where would we go? Where can we evacuate the patients to?"

The hospitals in the south and center of the Gaza Strip stressed that the humanitarian aid reported to have entered is doing nothing to improve the situation, and that the amount of diesel arriving cannot satisfy the hospitals' daily consumption, which stands at 6,000 liters a day at normal times.

"Today, with 200 percent occupancy, we receive around 4,500 liters. The meaning is a reduction in the operation of air conditioning, and in fact anything considered less than lifesaving. This includes many cleaning and hygiene devices. This is where we are."

Jack Houry

P.S.

• Haaretz. Dec 6, 2023:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-06/ty-article/.premium/hospitals-in-southern-gaza-strip-overwhelmed-by-scale-of-wounded-and-ill/0000018c-3e33-d11b-a3bf-febb23d70000>