



MSF medics at Al Aqsa Hospital with a young girl who lost her whole family in the bombing and has been in the hospital ever since. 29 November 2023 (© MSF)

The Reality Of Life

Inside The Gaza Strip

Providing medical and humanitarian care in a war zone is challenging at the best of times, but aid workers on the ground in Gaza have been faced with unprecedented conditions. An emergency aid coordinator and a rapid deployment staff member talk to Christine Maguire about the increasingly dire situation, mostly for the war-wounded women and children.

With almost 30,000 Palestinians killed and over 70,000 wounded since 7 October 2023, and most of the population displaced to the south, where hunger and disease spread and the threat of an Israeli offensive looms, the situation in Gaza is increasingly dire.

Gaza's health infrastructure has been decimated after almost five months of attacks that have seen overcrowded hospitals – none of which are fully functioning – bombed, raided and left without electricity and basic supplies.

Marie-Aure Perreaut Revial, an emergency coordinator with Médecines Sans Frontières (MSF) who is shortly due to return to Gaza, spoke to 'Emergency Services Ireland' about difficult working conditions at Al Aqsa Hospital in Deir-al-Belah in central Gaza.

"It was overcrowded, apocalyptic emergency departments...with patients lying everywhere, directly on the floor, or in the best case scenario on cardboard boxes, because there were no beds. And when we say patients, we're talking critically injured patients," she said.

“Sometimes they will be [the doctors and nurses] own relatives or colleagues. But then you have another patient who is also critically injured next to them. So, it’s a lot of very difficult, if not impossible, equations they must deal with. At the end of the day, you would have many healthcare workers saying, ‘Did I make the right decision? Did I go to the right patients?’” she said.

MEDICS PERFORM 'WAR SURGERY'

At the European Gaza Hospital (EGH) in Khan Younis, as nearby explosions rattle windows, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) medical teams perform “war surgery”, where the mission is “doing the most for the most” for victims of mass casualties, and a lack of supplies means improvisation is essential.

“You have an airstrike somewhere, and then you have a whole residential building collapsing, and at least 20 people coming in,” according to Kunlawat Note Chittarat, a member of the ICRC’s rapid deployment staff in Gaza. “When you don’t have water, how do you make sure you’re stitching up something that won’t be infected again in the next few hours?”, he told *Emergency Services Ireland*.

Wounds are being kept open, covered with gauze, to prevent infection, and doctors’ aprons replace sterile bed sheets when they run out. In operating theatres, ventilation and even the saline dripping into IV bags are done manually.

At Al Aqsa, “We had very, very high infection rates,



Marie-Aure Perreaut Reval, an emergency co-ordinator with *Médecines Sans Frontières (MSF)*



Patients waiting at Al Aqsa Hospital – 29 November 2023 (© MSF)

and sometimes we would see people who had one wound that was so so badly infected – and I’m talking worms coming out of the wounds – that then they needed an amputation,” Reval said.

Displaced Palestinians have flocked to hospitals for shelter, even though “there is no safe space left”. Chittarat estimates that “20,000 are living in and around the EGH compound” with tents lining the corridors, and even the staircases.

Many of the doctors working there are also displaced. They “risk their lives to come here to work,” Chittarat said. “Going back home, they don’t know if their home will still be there, or if their families will still be there waiting.”

Reval tells the story of a nurse who learned that her sister in northern Gaza had been killed from a TikTok video and returned to work after one day. “She said, ‘I have nothing else I can do. I cannot reach her, we cannot get her body back. I don’t know about the rest of the family... So I need to work to forget.’”

WOUNDED WOMEN AND CHILDREN

The ratio of women and children being treated for war wounds is “so much higher than many other places the ICRC has been working,” Chittarat said. “In three days, I think I saw three children under the age of two being treated. There shouldn’t be that much collateral damage.”

Discharging patients who have nowhere to go is another issue, and many are children with no surviving relatives. “What do you tell a nine-year-old who has lost their entire family when they need to free up a hospital bed?” Reval said.



Kunlawat Note Chittarat (ICRC) Kunlawat Note Chittarat, a member of the rapid deployment staff with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).



A patient receives a new dressing at Al Aqsa hospital – 29 November 2023. (© MSF)

Psychologists in Gaza are trying to support “children as young as young as five with suicidal thoughts,” she said. “They themselves also have lost families, have been displaced. So they're going through the same trauma. And then they have to provide coping mechanisms to children who just want to die.”



An MSF health worker attends people at the waiting area in Al-Shaboura clinic, Rafah, Gaza – 16 December 2023 (© Mohammed Abed)

DISPLACEMENT, HUNGER, DISEASE

In Rafah, where over half of Gaza's 2.3 million population is displaced and living in tents, Chittarat describes animals falling down in the streets from hunger, and a child making a single pea last for three minutes. “People are going days without food just so that their children can have something to chew on,” he explained, and animal feed is being used to make bread. Meanwhile, in the north, people are facing famine due to a lack of food.



The rising levels of rubbish in the camp in Rafah (©ICRC)



Tents and shelters in Rafah displacement camp (©ICRC)

“When it rains, some people sleep on cold, wet sand, as not everybody has a plastic sheet to put on the floor because they'd rather use that as the tent,” Chittarat said. “And of course, in camps, when you get one person sick, you get half the camp sick.”

At the Shohada Health Centre in Khan Younis, where half the patients are “under the age of five”, the MSF sees “respiratory tract infections, skin disease, such as scabies, and diarrhoea. All of these mean no access to water, no access to hygiene or sanitation,” Reval said.

Chittarat is “amazed” that there is not more civil unrest....and that kid with the pea, she wanted to share her other pea with me.... I don't know where they get that strength.”

Reval is often asked how Gaza is different to other crises. “This is a humanitarian crisis, but we're not able to provide a humanitarian response,” she said. “This is also documented. Since day one, everybody knows the scale. Everybody knows women and children are targeted, that they're suffering, that the entire [Gaza] strip is being destroyed.”

“We're always talking about intensification, but this word doesn't make sense anymore,” she added. “Because the level of destruction, the level of suffering that we've reached, is beyond something that you can use words to describe.”

For further information and to donate to the aid appeals, visit Medicines Sans Frontieres (MSF) www.msf.ie and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) www.icrc.org/en



Tents outside the European Gaza Hospital (©ICRC)