

Country Update

Palestine

(February 15, 2021)

Context and government response:

As of February 15, 2021, the West Bank and Gaza have registered 167,604 cases of COVID-19, including 1,933 deaths.

The Gaza Strip has a population of approximately 1.4 million people and communities are densely overcrowded and social distancing measures are almost impossible. The ability of the government to respond to the pandemic has been compounded by challenges related to the Israeli-imposed blockade that commenced in 2007, which severely impacts the health sector. The Gaza Strip has a chronic shortage of health equipment including ventilators, PPE, oxygen generating materials, hygiene materials and intensive care beds. This shortage of health equipment and supplies has been exacerbated by a reduction of transfer of medicines into Gaza, in an effort by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank attempting to damage and replace the legitimacy of Hamas.

Prior to the pandemic, the Palestinian unemployment rate had risen from 31% in 2018 to 33% in 2019, and the poverty level had increased from 25.8% to 29.2% between 2011 and 2017. 80% of the population in the Gaza Strip lacks food security, drinking water, electricity, health care, and hygiene supplies, as well as relies on unstable international assistance. Furthermore, in November, 2020, Israeli authority seizures and demolitions of Palestinian-owned structures reached 178 in the single month, which is the highest figure since OCHA began documenting this practice over 11 years ago.



Palestinian access to COVID-19 vaccinations has been inhibited. On January 9, 2021, Mai Alkaila, health minister of the Palestinian Authority stated that the Ministry of Health had come to agreements with several companies as well as the World Health Organization to obtain a supply of COVID-19 vaccines that would be sufficient to eventually cover the majority of the Palestinian population. The Palestinian Authority Foreign Ministry and members of the international community including the UN, have called for Israel to uphold its responsibility to provide equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. OHCHR noted that differential access between Israelis and Palestinians is "morally and legally" unacceptable under international law, referencing the Geneva Conventions on the regulation of occupied territories.

Summary of impacts:

The pandemic continues to fracture an already vastly under-resourced health care system in Palestine, which has faced a 13-year blockade, shortages of water and electricity, as well as widespread poverty and unemployment. Before the pandemic, high poverty and unemployment rates were present, and forecasts for the Palestinian economy for 2020 and 2021 projected a 3-4.5% decrease in GDP per capita. Additionally, the Palestinian economy relies on official and private transfers. Both are expected to further decline post-pandemic, and it was anticipated by UNCTAD in 2020 that donor support over 2020 would fall to the lowest in more than a decade to approximately \$266 million. However, while under occupation, the Palestinian National Authority lacks economic and policy capacity to address the enormous challenge faced due to the pandemic.

In addition to the pandemic, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres noted that "acts of violence, the constant threat of escalation in Gaza, movement and access restrictions, incitement, and human rights violations persist, keeping the situation highly volatile" in Palestine.

Cases of gender-based violence (GBV) in Palestine steadily increased during the period of lockdown period, ad-hoc curfews, and social distancing measures while access to security, protection, and justice services have decreased. The Ministry of Women's Affairs noted that



the common forms of violence during the pandemic have included physical and psychological violence, verbal abuse and economic violence.

Responses led by women:

Women and women's organisations in Palestine have been working to document impacts of the pandemic of Palestinian women and girls, including The Palestinian Working Women Society (PWWSD) who has been reporting calls for support particularly from domestic violence, SAWA who has been reporting suicide attempts due to sexual abuse, incest, harassment and attempted rape.

The PWWSD team has been working across the West Bank and Gaza to coordinate with different actors as part of its efforts to provide women in need with the needed services. They have led social awareness activities, including social media posts on the official Facebook page, serving to raise awareness and knowledge on mechanisms for dealing with psychosocial stress that is caused by COVID-19 emergency situation, dealing with children, emotional distress, fear and anxiety, and time management. As of April 4, 2020, these posts had reached 155,296 individuals with 8051 engagements. They also created Facebook and Whatsapp groups where they were able to directly contact interested and willing rights-holders to exchange experiences and feelings related to the emergency situation in their areas.

With support from the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF), The Culture and Free Association (CFTA) is providing financial support to women-headed households across the Gaza strip who are at risk of losing their businesses and income due to COVID-19, and provide them with SRHR services; and the Mother's School Society is supporting women business owners who have been economically impacted by COVID-19 by providing them with cash grants, counseling sessions, and capacity-building trainings on management, accounting, and online-selling.

