# West Bank hospitals overwhelmed as Israel withholds vaccines

**Jean Shaoul**
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Amid rapidly rising infection rates in the occupied West Bank that have overwhelmed its limited health care system, hospitals have been forced to turn away COVID-19 patients, prompting the Palestinian Authority to impose a five-day partial lockdown that began on Monday.

The West Bank, with a population of 3.1 million Palestinians, has recorded more than 146,000 cases and 1,667 deaths since March 2020, likely an underestimate given the lack of testing facilities. Daily new infections have surpassed 2,000 for some weeks, largely due to newer and more deadly variants of the disease.

The World Bank said that with more than 21 percent of tests proving positive in the West Bank and 29 percent in Gaza, the pandemic is out of control. Last weekend, there were 20,733 active cases in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, while the number of seriously ill patients in the West Bank had risen to 170, of whom 48 were on ventilators.

Comparing the situation with the first and second waves of the pandemic, a Palestinian Authority (PA) health official said that today "the picture is much more serious and dangerous, and the atmosphere is that there's no control over anything."

The PA's Health Minister Mai al-Kaileh told the PA's official Wafa news agency that hospital occupancy rates had reached a staggering 110 percent last week, while Ramallah, al-Bireh, Jericho and the Jerusalem suburbs had reached 115 percent. She said that occupancy rates in intensive care units were high, with nearly half of critical COVID-19 patients reliant on respirators.

Local media is replete with stories of people being turned away from hospitals or having to sleep on mattresses in hospital hallways or storage rooms, while others are sleeping on chairs. A Palestinian nurse in Bethlehem described the situation in hospitals as "hellish," saying the situation is "so much worse than anyone can imagine." She told the *Mondoweiss* website, "We are turning people away, very sick people, because we have nowhere to put them. At this point it's like we were waiting for people to die just so that someone else can take their bed or their ventilator."

*Middle East Eye* cited the case of Issa Saafi who had taken his mother, suffering from COVID symptoms and a heart attack, to Ramallah's public hospital. A video of the visibly distressed Issa speaking to a local Palestinian news station about what happened to his mother went viral on Palestinian social media last week. He explained that with nowhere else to put her, staff wheeled her to a storage room. He said, "When we were there, we saw about four nurses treating 80 patients. They couldn't keep up with anyone. On just that first day when I was sitting in the hospital, I saw three people die from COVID-19 in front of me. It was devastating to watch. The hospitals can't keep up. The doctors can't keep up. The doctors kept telling us they are doing their best, but they can't do anything more for us."

But while the virus is killing Palestinians at alarming rates, there is little prospect they will get vaccinated anytime soon.

Responsibility for the horrendous situation in the West Bank lies with Israel, the occupying power. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition government has refused to supply the Palestinians with vaccine. This is a flagrant violation of Israel's responsibilities under the 1949 Geneva Convention for the health of the Palestinians living in the areas it controls, including the obligation to ensure medical supplies and preventative measures "to combat the spread of contagious diseases and epidemics."

Furthermore, while Israel agreed under the Oslo Accords to co-operate on issues involving health care and epidemics, it in practice reneged on its obligations to the extent that the Palestinians have long endured problems importing medical equipment. Israel's opaque security

permit system makes it difficult for those in need of life-saving medical care to seek treatment in Israel or abroad.

Health Minister Yuli Edelstein arrogantly declared, "It is our interest, not our legal obligation, but it is our interest to make sure that Palestinians get the vaccine, that we don't have COVID-19 spreading." He said, "First of all we can also look into the so-called Oslo agreements, where it says loud and clear that Palestinians have to take care of their own health."

This has left the PA dependent upon the World Health Organisation's COVAX program that has been subject to repeated delays, although it has now begun to receive 12,000 doses of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine for medical workers, including 2,000 for health care professionals in Gaza. But several hundred doses of the vaccine were given to PA ministers, their staff, PA officials and their families, Palestinian media figures close to the PA and 200 to the Jordanian royal household, provoking enormous popular anger against the Palestinian elite.

It was only after Israel came under intense international pressure, including from the UN, that it agreed to send a paltry 5,000 doses for Palestinian health care workers as a "humanitarian" gesture and began vaccinating Palestinians who work in the settlements and in Israel, with some 105,000 Palestinian workers vaccinated to date, to stop the virus spreading within Israel itself.

Israel's criminal policy towards the Palestinians is all the more obscene given that Netanyahu has made the vaccination drive the centre piece of his campaign for re-election on March 23, the fourth election in two years. Netanyahu aims to vaccinate the entire population over the age of 16 by the end of April. According to Health Ministry figures released earlier this week, Israel has given the first vaccine shot to 5,200,395 people, of whom 4,291,116 (46 percent of the population) have also had the second.

To achieve this, Netanyahu paid premium prices for the vaccine and—in breach of privacy laws—handed over the anonymized but detailed data collected by Israel's health care network over to Pfizer. According to the Health Ministry, Israel has paid $788 million so far for the vaccines and expects to pay a similar amount for more doses in the future. This suggests that Israel has paid more than the $23.5 per Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine dose ($47 per person) reported by the Kan public broadcaster in January, which was higher than the amount that Pfizer had initially said the shots would cost and higher than either the US or the European Union (EU) is paying for the vaccine.

According to the Israeli Democracy Institute (IDI), Israel has bought 24 million doses, enough to vaccinate 12 million people, i.e., the entire population of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories above the age of 16 and still leaving a surplus!

In February, *Ha'aretz* reported that hundreds of doses were being thrown away every day due to Israelis cancelling or failing to turn up for their appointments, fuelling Palestinian anger against Israel. At the same time, Netanyahu sought to use this surplus to give to 19 countries, including Guatemala, Honduras and the Czech Republic that had increased their diplomatic presence in Jerusalem, saying "I think it buys goodwill," until forced to halt the transfer pending the outcome of a legal challenge in the courts.

This inequitable, irrational and utterly criminal distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine is an indictment not just of Israel, but the imperialist powers and the Arab bourgeoisie that have backed Israel's suppression of the Palestinians and paved the way for this catastrophe.

It confirms yet again that the global allocation of human resources under capitalism is an abject failure. Despite the wonderful achievement of producing safe and effective vaccines against the disease in less than twelve months, their distribution is subject to the diktat of the markets and the narrow and selfish interests of competing national elites that serve only to prolong the pandemic and social and economic suffering.

The only way forward lies in the independent mobilization and unification of Arab, Jewish and Iranian workers in a common struggle for a Socialist Federation of the Middle East as part of the fight to put an end to capitalism all over the world.