

Australian healthworkers rally in opposition to Israeli destruction of Gazan hospitals, clinics

Our reporters
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Approximately 100 doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers rallied in central Melbourne yesterday evening in protest against the Israeli government's murderous offensive in Gaza. This has involved numerous bombings of healthcare facilities, including the devastating attack on Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital on Tuesday, killing nearly 500 people.

The demonstration in Melbourne came a day after a similar rally of health workers in the western Sydney suburb of Liverpool, and is part of a global movement of workers and young people against the Israeli military's onslaught against the 2.2 million Palestinians in Gaza.

Healthcare professionals in both Sydney and Melbourne organised their rallies independently of the doctors and nurses trade unions. No representative of the unions featured at either event.

Chants included, "Stop, stop genocide. Stop, stop war crimes. Stop, stop hospital bombings."

Among the handmade banners, one read: "W.C.N.S.F. = Wounded child, no surviving family. Used so often in Gaza HCWs [healthcare workers] made it an acronym."

Dr. Jasmin said: "I am Muslim, I am Arab, but what owns us and unites us here today has nothing to do with religion and ethnicity, it's quite different actually. Whether you're religious or not, political or not—humanity, human life is sacred. The doctors amongst us made an oath to preserve quality of life at all costs, to be beneficent and just."

She continued, referring to Tuesday's hospital bombing, "This was not just an attack on the medical system, or medical care, this was an attack on humanity, as is the entire siege on Gaza. We gather

here today in absolute agony—agony for our colleagues working and volunteering in Gaza, with little to no resources—agony for the hundreds of lost lives, innocent lives. These lives were taken in the one place they thought they could have a safe haven. A healing ground became a cemetery overnight. Hospitals are not targets. They never are, and nobody, nobody, should get away with delivering them like this."

Dr. Mohammad Irhimeh, a Palestinian-Australian, works as a haematologist at The Royal Children's Hospital. He spoke of his horror seeing the reports from Al-Ahli Hospital and denounced the Israeli authorities: "This disgusting tactic of denying atrocities that they commit every day, and pointing their finger at the victims, is Israeli propaganda from a textbook. They have done it multiple times and they will continue to do it, day in and day out, unless we and the world say, 'Enough!'"

Dr. Irhimeh continued: "Prior to the Al-Ahli hospital massacre, the WHO [World Health Organization] already pointed out that there have been over 51 attacks on healthcare facilities. Fifteen healthcare workers have been killed, 27 have been injured and that continues. There are countless videos that you've seen from the ground, people living or reporting from Gaza, that have documented the numerous attacks on ambulances, hospitals and healthcare workers. And if we go back in history, only a couple of years ago in 2021, this is according to the UN records, Israel air strikes in Gaza have damaged six hospitals, nine healthcare centres and the desalination plant that supplies clean water to half of Gaza. It is a genocide."

He spoke of the healthcare system in the occupied Palestinian territories: "Do you know how many

hospital beds are in Australia? 62,000 beds. But in Gaza, which has half the population of Victoria, there's only 1,600 beds. There's only 13 hospitals, 54 primary healthcare centres and only three main emergency departments. Of those 1,600 beds, only 72 are ICU beds and 63 have ventilators. There's only 350 doctors, with around 1,000 nurses. But at the moment there's more than 15,000 trauma patients waiting to be seen by somebody.

“The health system in Gaza was already weak and exhausted, even before this recent attack. That's because of the 17 years of siege, chronic shortages of medical supplies, and lack of essential equipment. The ongoing attacks have further devastated the already fatigued and weak infrastructure, leaving hospitals struggling to function among widespread destruction, medical staff already overwhelmed by the influx of patients. We are facing an even greater challenge in providing critical care to the growing number of wounded. The acute shortage of skilled medical professionals and specialists, particularly in surgical fields, is increasing the suffering, leaving many patients without access to vital life-saving procedures.

“Health, and having access to healthcare, is a universal human right. We, as healthcare workers, need to unite in order to condemn this deliberate attack on healthcare workers in Gaza and Palestine. We call on the Australian government to issue a real condemnation of what is happening there and to urge the international community to pressure Israel to stop its aggression, occupation and siege of Gaza and Palestine. We should be silent when children sleep, not when they die.”

Riyad Aladassi, a Palestinian-Australian anaesthetic and recovery hospital nurse, said: “This photo, this is my friend Tasneer, he was an ambulance driver and a paramedic. He was recently killed along with six other paramedics while they were trying to save lives, they were all directly targeted. Tasneer was amazing, courageous—just like all our paramedics and ambulance drivers. We would be together in the hot zone and he would look at me and I would look at him and we would go, ‘Who wants to go first?’, to pick up a body or a casualty.”

He continued: “The Al-Ahli Hospital is where I received the majority of my training, the largest hospital in the Gaza Strip. I became who I am, the nurse that I am, there. The area they bombarded was

where we used to play some football, a little bit of soccer between breaks. A message I got from my friend there was this: ‘We will not leave. We will not abandon our people. We'd rather die here.’ So this is the spirit of the Palestinian people.”

The final speaker at the rally was Dr. Shazeea Mohamed Ali, a geriatrician and general physician.

“We mourn the loss of all innocent lives and we reflect on our duty of care to provide care for all people, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, creed, or gender,” she explained. “Israel has cut off electricity, fuel, food and water to 2.2 million people. Hospitals have been bombed, medical care cannot be delivered, surgery is being conducted without painkillers. Women and children, and for me the elderly, that's who I look after, are being killed indiscriminately. Four thousand murdered, one million people displaced, these are crimes under international law. Doctors operating in Gaza are losing their lives, hospitals operated by even international aid organisations are being attacked.”

She concluded: “The world cannot stand by and allow this bloodshed to continue. We believe in life, justice, equality and dignity. We call on others, and all our medical associations, the AMA [Australian Medical Association], all our unions, to be persistent and do the same. Finally, I have a short message for our Palestinian brothers and sisters who work in healthcare—medicines have run out, you are being targeted, your families are being killed, and still you serve! We see you, we hear you, we support you, and we will never forget your sacrifice!”



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