

Israel to force cancer patients being treated in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv back to Gaza

Benjamin Mateus
24 March 2024

On Wednesday, CNN reported that Israel's Supreme Court had temporarily suspended the government plan to return a group of 22 Gazan Palestinians being treated in hospitals in East Jerusalem and Tel Aviv that include five newborn babies, their mothers, and cancer patients deemed in remission, including their companions, back to Gaza amidst the ongoing genocidal campaign that has seen 32,000 people killed, nearly 75,000 injured and hundreds of thousands on the brink of starvation.

The patients and their families were to board buses on Thursday headed for the Kerem Shalom border crossing into Rafah had it not been for the petition to the courts written by the Israeli non-profit organization, Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHRI).

In what amounts to a stay of execution, the spokesman for PHRI said, "Returning residents to Gaza during a military conflict and a humanitarian crisis is against international law and poses a deliberate risk to innocent lives. All the more so when it concerns patients who may face a death sentence due to insanitary conditions and hunger, along with the unlikely availability of medical care."

According to the Israeli defense ministry, COGAT [Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories], they have been attempting to obtain from the hospitals a list of patient names who are deemed as no longer requiring in-patient medical treatment and to be returned to Gaza. This does not take into account that every one of these patients needs comprehensive outpatient follow-up care and complex treatments and resources that are no longer existent, as the entire infrastructure to support the 2 million-plus population has essentially been razed to the ground.

Dr. Fadi Atrash, who heads the Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem, which treats Gazan cancer patients, told CNN on the COGAT policies, "It's not our call, at the end of the day. And this is really frustrating. We have not been able to help people in Gaza since the beginning of the war. As doctors, this is our daily feeling, that we are not able to do anything."

In the context of nearly six months of continuous shelling,

sniper attacks, summary executions, wholesale destruction of the healthcare apparatus, the bureaucratic decree for these two dozen or so frail and doubly traumatized people to vacate their sanctuary and return to their war torn non-existent homes speaks to the complete depravity and inhumanity of Israel's genocidal policies against a people that have been occupied for more than 75 years under the most onerous conditions. Such moments provide a social microscope into the inner workings of fascism's hypocrisy and cruel banalities.

Speaking with a CNN journalist, a tearful Nima Abu Garrara, who was transported to Jerusalem for a high-risk complicated twin pregnancy (she gave birth on October 5), said, "If I go back with the twins ... where do I go with them? Where would I get diapers and milk? Gaza is not the same anymore." Of the impending invasion, she added, "I might go back and then they invade Rafah. I'll be the one responsible for anything that harms them. I was dying when I came here and stayed with them here to protect them."

Indeed, this week, news outlets confirmed that several children have already perished from starvation as famine lays siege across Northern Gaza and threatens areas in the South. The Gaza Ministry of Health said that as of March 19, 2024, at least 27 children had died from malnutrition and dehydration. These are clearly gross underestimates.

Contextualizing this impending famine, an Australian Broadcasting Corporation report remarked on the plight of two-year-old Watin al-Aswad who, since Israel's onslaught in October, has lost half her body weight, at seven kilograms (15.4 pounds). With protruding eyes and gaunt face, the once boisterous toddler is confined to her hospital bed unable to sit or walk, let alone lift her arms. A healthy weight for such an age is around 15 to 18 kilograms (33 to 40 pounds).

In North Gaza, about 210,000 people were in phase five, which refers to catastrophic hunger. UNICEF also remarked that 335,000 children under the age of five in the Gaza strip are at high risk of severe malnutrition. One in four households is facing famine. Cases of respiratory infections

and diarrheal diseases are in the hundreds of thousands. The internal food supply is utterly depleted, and the entire population remains reliant on the supply trucks that Israel allows in, a fraction of what is required to sustain the population.

UNICEF executive director Catherine Russell recently told reporters, “The speed at which this catastrophic child malnutrition crisis in Gaza has unfolded is shocking, especially when desperately needed assistance has been at the ready just a few miles away. We have repeatedly attempted to deliver additional aid and we have repeatedly called for the access challenges we have faced for months to be addressed. Instead, the situation for children is getting worse with each passing day. Our efforts in providing life-saving aid are being hampered by unnecessary restrictions, and those are costing children their lives.”

Even the World Bank has admitted that without urgent action widespread deaths from starvation would be imminent over the next two months. According to their analysis, of the 2.3 million Gazans, 1.1 million people were in the highest risk category and a further 854,000 in the preceding lower level, “people in emergency.” Should the call for a ceasefire materialize and the Rafah invasion be postponed, the famine will continue to prosecute Israel’s war on the population.

As for those requiring cancer treatment, with the scant resources that include healthcare workers being solely directed at treating the most urgent of trauma cases that pour into the remaining but barely functioning hospitals, such matters assume a hopeless irrelevance regardless of the fate that awaits the untreated.

Indeed, the social capacity that requires the screening, diagnosing, and then treating of malignancies also means the existence of a social infrastructure that has attained the ability to function in a deeply organized concert manner that prioritizes life as an objective goal. It is the end product of the highest social achievements and, therefore, the first casualty when inequity, mass poverty and war consume the entire social infrastructure, especially for the working class, who rely on these services that provide them with a sense that their well-being is a social priority.

In a November 2023 report published in *Cureus* titled, “A double battle—fighting cancer in the shadows of conflict in Gaza,” the authors wrote, “The situation for patients with cancer in the Gaza Strip is deeply concerning. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, the cancer incidence rate in the region was 91.3 cases per 100,000 people in 2021. In the same year, there were 1,952 new cancer diagnoses and 610 deaths attributed to the disease. This adds to the cumulative burden of cancer in the area, with a five-year prevalence of cases reaching 10,566 by 2020. These statistics are set against a backdrop of significant challenges

for cancer care in the Gaza Strip, where the ongoing conflict and displacement have led to catastrophic health conditions for patients with cancer.”

The attack on October 30, 2023 by Israeli airstrikes on the Turkish-Palestinian Friendship Hospital in Gaza, the largest in Palestine and the only specialized cancer center in Gaza, meant the ability to provide essential medical supplies such as chemotherapy and vital treatments like radiation were severely impacted. On November 1, 2023, the hospital became non-operational after the fuel ran out and heavy damage made the premises non-functional.

The situation for Gazans with cancers was already harrowing, with almost 40 percent of applicants for permission to travel for treatment being denied even before the beginning of large-scale conflicts in October 2023. Despite 1,800 new cancer cases each year, the health system in Gaza lacked 60 percent of the appropriate pharmaceuticals and treatments necessary to offer the standard of care. Unsurprisingly, cancer survival has fallen by 50 percent in a decade’s time (2008 to 2017), according to the World Health Organization.

However, these statistics belie the realities, as a real comparison would require a comparison to other countries. For instance, while breast cancer impacts 20 percent of all cancer cases in Palestine, these patients have a five-year survival of 65 percent compared to wealthier regions where rates stand at approximately 90 percent.

Even these horrific issues have become moot in the face of Israel’s fascist policies. And the fate of the 22 people waiting a decision by the Supreme Court of Israel is assuredly sealed.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact