
Palestinian Health Ministry in financial crisis, WHO warns

1 SEPTEMBER 2006 | GENEVA/STOCKHOLM -- The Palestinian Health Ministry is facing a growing financial crisis as well as a humanitarian crisis, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned ahead of the Stockholm donor conference on the humanitarian situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The health component of the revised UN humanitarian appeal for the territory is critically underfunded despite growing humanitarian needs, especially in Gaza.

The situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has been deteriorating due to a severe funding crisis and the recent escalation of violence, on top of five years of the Intifada. Military activity, restrictions on movement, a severe economic downturn and escalating unemployment have had an extremely negative impact on the health of the Palestinian people.

On Saturday, government employees in the West Bank, including health workers, began a strike to demand payment of their long-overdue salaries. The funding crisis at the Ministry of Health has worsened since economic restrictions were imposed in March this year and now threatens the delivery of essential health services. The Ministry manages 60% of health services and all public health programmes in the territory. Should this crisis continue, the Palestinian health system will further deteriorate and services will be disrupted, with grave consequences for the health of the Palestinian people. An early sign of this disruption is the alternating shortages of essential drugs and supplies reported by the Ministry.

"There are urgent needs including essential medicines and supplies that have to be met as soon as possible," said Dr Ala Alwan, Representative of the WHO Director-General for Health Action in Crisis. "WHO is responding to some of the most urgent needs from its internal resources but the funds available are limited. We hope that the international community will generously respond to this appeal so that we can make difference in the life and health of the Palestinian people."

"We can't continue unless we get our salaries," said a senior director in the Ministry of Health in Nablus, standing with other striking employees outside the hospital. "We have been quiet six months and can't be quiet any longer."

On Monday, WHO staff visited hospitals and primary health care facilities in Ramallah and Bethlehem districts. They found that hospital admissions and surgical operations are only accepted in very critical cases, once approved by a technical medical committee and the local strike committee. On Thursday, the Minister of Health underlined his concern over the ongoing strike in West Bank and made a call to the international community to renew its commitments in support of the health of the Palestinian population.

On 12 June, WHO organized a meeting attended by the Ministry of Health of the Palestinian Authority, UNRWA, the World Bank, OCHA, other UN agencies and around 30 donors to review the current health situation and to discuss mechanisms to address the needs of the Palestinian population and avert a health crisis.

The international community formulated a plan of action – the Temporary International Mechanism, which started providing allowances to health workers and covering running costs including fuel for health institutions. Until this mechanism becomes completely operational, there is a need for financial bridges to avoid a collapse of the health care system and to ensure that critical health needs are addressed. In the meantime WHO has been monitoring the health situation and accessibility to health care and will continue to provide periodic updates on the situation.

WHO requested for \$30 million as part of the revised UN appeal. As at 31 August, only \$1.4 million had been received.

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