



JOINT STATEMENT

CONCERN OVER HALTING OF GAZA MEDICAL PATIENT REFERRALS

30 March 2009

(Jerusalem) The United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator, together with the World Health Organization (WHO) for West Bank and Gaza have expressed serious concerns about the halting of medical patient referrals out of the Gaza Strip.

On 22 March, the Hamas de facto authorities in the Gaza Strip took control of the Palestinian Authority Ministry of Health Referral Abroad Department. This is the main office which assesses and processes referral applications by Gaza patients for specialized hospital treatment outside Gaza. The Palestinian Authority Ministry of Health in Ramallah will not approve or fund applications as a result, and Israel and Egypt will not allow them to exit Gaza unless they have been approved by the Palestinian Authority. All Gaza patient referrals have been halted due to this action, affecting many patients with serious and complicated conditions.

"We are very worried about the situation", said Tony Laurance, acting Head of WHO in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. "Around 900 patients a month were being referred outside of Gaza for treatment at hospitals in Israel, East Jerusalem, Egypt, and Jordan in the first half of 2008. Some of the cases are urgent and require immediate treatment. We have already seen referrals affected, and patients will die if they do not receive the treatment they require," he added.

Both WHO and the Humanitarian Coordinator office have intervened in Gaza to seek the urgent reversal of the 22 March decision, but have not received a positive response.

"We need a speedy solution", said Mr. Gaylard, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator. "Whatever difficulties may or may not have existed regarding the procedures, it is not acceptable for essential patient care to be stopped because of an internal political dispute or unilateral steps. We call for a rapid solution to be found among the parties concerned to enable referrals to resume and patients' rights to be protected and for Hamas to reverse their decision so that a way forward can be found."

For more information:

Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator: **Allegra Pacheco**, Mobile: +972 (0)54-3311806

World Health Organization: **Tony Laurance**, Mobile: +972 (0)54-7179010