



19 March 2018, Gaza – World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus today called for urgent action to improve health conditions in Gaza after concluding his first visit to the occupied Palestinian territory.

During his visit to Gaza, Dr Tedros witnessed the challenges that many people face in accessing quality health services. Chronic electricity shortages in Gaza are hindering the provision of life-saving medical services, and emergency fuel supplies are only enough to keep generators running for another few months. More than 40% of essential drugs are completely depleted in Gaza's Central Drug Store, including drugs used in emergency departments and other critical units.

Access for patients requiring health care outside the Gaza Strip has also been declining: only 54% of patient applications to access services outside Gaza were accepted by Israeli authorities in 2017 compared to more than 90% of applications accepted in 2012. Approximately one third of these are for access to cancer treatment and diagnostic services lacking in Gaza. WHO and its partners are working with the Palestinian health ministry to address these issues.

Dr Tedros visited Shifa hospital, Gaza's largest, to deliver essential lifesaving medical equipment procured as part of WHO's emergencies programme. He also met with UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, which is playing an essential role in providing primary care services for Palestinian refugees. Despite new funding of \$100 million pledged at a ministerial conference in Rome on 15 March, UNRWA faces a critical funding shortage which may result in social services including primary health care being curtailed as soon as July.

“Despite the best efforts of health workers, many of whom have not been paid in months, Gaza’s health services are at breaking point,” Dr Tedros said. “Shortages of electricity, fuel and essential medicines are putting lives at risk. I call on all parties and partners to alleviate the suffering of many people.”

In separate meetings with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and representatives from the Government of Israel, Dr Tedros emphasised the need to use health as a bridge to peace, and to respect, protect and fulfil the right to health for all, including for Palestinians living in the occupied Palestinian territory. Israeli representatives agreed to work with WHO to address the issues raised.



He raised concerns over access restrictions for vulnerable patients to exit Gaza for health care not available within the Gaza Strip and highlighted the need to address the humanitarian health needs in Gaza and to develop the capacities of the local health system, including, for example, by ensuring reliable energy infrastructure for hospitals and clinics.

In addition to addressing Gaza’s health challenges, Dr Tedros discussed how to strengthen the Palestinian health system and achieve universal health coverage. He visited the Palestinian National Institute of Public Health, which aims to strengthen the Palestinian health system, with technical support from WHO and funding from the Government of Norway.

WHO, the World Bank and the Palestinian Ministry of Health also agreed recently to establish a partnership to make progress towards universal health coverage by supporting work on health financing reform, health workforce planning, and to expand the family practice model of primary care. Work has already started to address critical gaps in cancer treatment.

A regular session of the international donor coordination group in support of the Palestinian economy, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC), will convene on 20 March in Brussels. To help meet the most immediate challenges in Gaza, like the absence of drinking water, the EU will also host a pledging conference on the Gaza Central Desalination Plant to meet humanitarian needs and to contribute to the economic development of Gaza.

### **Note to editors**

WHO's programme in the occupied Palestinian territory has offices in Jerusalem, Ramallah and Gaza, with 59 staff. WHO works in partnership with the Ministry of Health, with programmatic priorities including health systems development to support universal health coverage, strengthening the core capacities for the International Health Regulations, management of noncommunicable diseases, health information and coordination, emergency preparedness and response, support to mental health, and advocacy for the right to health.

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