



WHO Regional Director Dr Al-Mandhari visiting Palestinian Public Health Laboratory in Ramallah. Photo: WHO

27 February 2019, oPt - Concluding a three-day visit to the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, called for ensuring regular and reliable access to health for all Palestinians and respect for the sanctity of health care.

During his visit, the Regional Director met with Prime Minister Dr Rami Hamdallah for a discussion on the importance of achieving universal health coverage, and reiterated WHO's support to ongoing efforts to improve the health and well-being of all Palestinians.

In his meeting with Minister of Health Dr Jawad Awad, the Regional Director commended the progress made to improve health services that best meet people's needs, noting that WHO will continue to work closely with the Ministry of Health to strengthen the Palestinian health system and respond to humanitarian health needs.

The Regional Director underlined that the recently enforced restrictions on vaccine imports to the oPt might, if not resolved, jeopardize sustainability of the highly successful immunization programme and pose a serious health security threat, not only to the West Bank and Gaza, but also to neighbouring countries.

At the Palestinian National Institute of Public Health, a WHO-led project, Dr Al-Mandhari praised the close collaboration between WHO, Palestinian health authorities and partners to produce evidence for informed health policy decisions and improved health outcomes.

In Gaza, Dr Al-Mandhari voiced concerns over the growing access restrictions for patients. In 2018, only 61% of the Palestinians who required health services outside the Gaza Strip obtained an Israeli permit to travel, posing a substantial impediment to accessing health care, particularly for vulnerable patients.

Visiting Gaza's largest hospital, Shifa, the Regional Director witnessed firsthand the fragility of an overburdened health system. The influx of trauma patients is putting extra strain on hospitals that have to discharge patients prematurely to make room for newly injured. Chronic shortages of medicines and medical supplies is a significant challenge, with almost half of essential medicines and over a quarter of essential medical disposables at less than a month's supply over the last year.

With attacks on health care in the Gaza Strip continuing with disturbing regularity, Dr Al-Mandhari also reiterated a call to all parties to respect the sanctity of health staff and medical facilities. In 2018, oPt saw the highest number of reported attacks on health care globally, and the highest number of injuries to health workers: 363 attacks on health care were reported, leading to the tragic deaths of three health workers and leaving 565 more injured.

"Health is a fundamental human right, and attacks on health care are a violation of that right," Dr Al-Mandhari said. "I call on all parties to abide by their legal obligations under international

humanitarian law and respect the sanctity and safety of health facilities and health workers. Health care is not a target.”

Wednesday 27th of February 2019 03:42:24 PM