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Frightened Palestinians Call On Israel To Speed Vaccine Delivery

At a time when the COVID-19 crisis is in retreat throughout much of the world, Palestinians are suffering through their worst lock-down since the start of the pandemic, with infections surging and no prospect of relief from vaccines.

“People here are panicked,” said Mohammed Sawalha, a professor at the Al-Najah University and founder of the Palestinian House of Friendship (PHF), a community center in the city of Nablus which provides services for children. “They are afraid of what is coming. There is no strategy, no plan and no vaccines.”

The Advocacy Project has partnered with PHF since 2015 and recently donated \$500 to a PHF initiative, Boxes of Love, to help struggling families in Nablus.

According to [The World Health Organization](#), 245,790 Palestinians have been infected in the West Bank and Gaza since the pandemic began. Cases rose by 4,193 between Tuesday and Wednesday, in spite of a severe lock-down. Deaths rose by 29 to 2,561.

Adding to the stress is a growing conviction that Israel has withheld vaccines to put pressure on the Palestinians. Seventeen members of the US House of Representatives issued [an open letter on Monday](#) accusing Israel of failing to live up to its responsibility as an occupying power.

With a population of around 160,000, Nablus has one of the highest rates of infection on the West Bank, partly because it serves as a referral center for the north of the West Bank and includes three overcrowded refugee camps.

Nablus has 12 hospitals and recently opened two centers for COVID-19 cases only. But both filled up quickly, according to Dr Abdelsalaam Al-Khaiyat, a Palestinian epidemiologist and professor who sits on the COVID emergency committee of the Nablus governorate.

“My worst nightmare has always been that there would be no beds for patients at hospitals,” said Dr Al-Khaiyat. “That’s what we now see. This has been absolutely the worst time since the start of the pandemic last March.”

Dr Al-Khaiyat said that 263 people had died from the virus in Nablus so far. Hospital wards are overflowing and sick patients are lined up in corridors. The virus is infecting

a growing number of young people and endangering children. Half of the cases have occurred in the last ten weeks.

Mr Sawalha also painted a grim picture of life in Nablus during a wide-ranging Zoom meeting. As in any close community, deaths are difficult to bear and Mr Sawalha said that the virus has claimed the lives of five faculty members at his university. Two young members of his staff were recently diagnosed with the virus.

All shops in Nablus are closed except for pharmacies and bakeries, which are open for two days a week. This has further devastated an economy and administration that was already suffering from occupation and mismanagement.

The education system is collapsing in remote villages where families do not have access to the Internet or computers. Remote learning is even difficult in refugee camps that are close to the city said Ansaf Khalil, who teaches at the Balata refugee camp. Ms Khalil's daughter Dareen is depressed and “dreaming of an end to this nightmare,” she said.

With family food stocks running dangerously low, the authorities in Nablus are under growing pressure to ease the lock-down. This, however, could open the floodgates. “It is a very dark picture,” said Mr Sawalha.

The main line of defense against the virus – vaccines - is still not available to Palestinians. So far, according to press reports, the Palestinian Authority has only acquired 92,000 doses for a population of over 5 million. This includes 30,000 doses of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V and 58,000 doses of the Pfizer and AstraZenaca vaccines which recently arrived through COVAX, the international sharing program.

But the new vaccines have yet to reach those on the front lines. Dr Al-Khayiat said that Nablus has only received “a few hundred doses” and estimated that less than a fifth of the city’s health workers had been vaccinated by Sunday.

This contrasts with Israel, where [4.4 million Israelis](#) – 47.4% of the population – have received two vaccinations. [According to press reports](#), Israel’s Prime Minister has even offered to supply doses to countries that support Israel’s decision to name Jerusalem as Israel’s capital – although this plan is on hold and facing a legal challenge. Israeli settlers have been vaccinated.

Israel has offered 5,000 doses to the Palestinian Authority, of which 2,000 have been delivered, and [started to vaccinate Palestinians](#) who travel daily to Israel to work. But overall, Israel maintains that health is the responsibility of the Palestinian Authority.

This is not credible to Palestinians, who see a deliberate policy to deny vaccines to the West Bank and Gaza. Dr Al-Khayiat said that even Area C – the land controlled by Israel under the Oslo Accords – has not received vaccines.

“Even before the pandemic it was hard to import medical equipment,” said Dr Al-Khayiat, adding that the Israeli customs had held up the delivery of PPE and masks in the early stages of the pandemic. “It is really bizarre to have the country with the highest vaccination rate in the world next to the country with one of the lowest rates occupying the same space. This makes no sense given how this virus is spread.”

Mr Sawalha described Israel's approach as a "soft and silent form of genocide." While this might seem like overheated rhetoric, the desperation in Palestine will strike a chord in anyone who has experienced the terror of COVID-19.

Israel's policy drew a sharp rebuke on Monday from 17 members of Congress, who sent an [open letter to the US Secretary of State](#) urging the Biden administration to pressure Israel.

Congressman Mark Pocan from Wisconsin, one of the sponsors, wrote: "Israel has a legal responsibility, under international law, as the occupying power to provide the Palestinian people with necessary medical care—including the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines."

"The world cannot allow Israel to say this is not their responsibility" agreed Mohammed Sawalha in Nablus. "Israel is controlling everything. If this is not their responsibility, they should withdraw from the land and leave it to the Palestinians."

Mr Sawalha has built an active network of friends in the US, who admire his energy and commitment to improving the lives of young Palestinians, and they have reacted with outrage to his appeals.

"So disgusting! It makes the blood boil!" wrote one PHF supporter.

This bulletin was written by Iain Guest. [Contact us with feedback.](#)