

## The situation in Gaza – will cruelty and hatred triumph?

The 15 December 2023 was declared a public holiday by President Ramaphosa owing to South Africa winning the Rugby World Cup for the fourth time. I am far from being in a happy, elated and celebratory mood. In fact, I write this editorial with a heavy heart. The despondence that I felt on 7 October this year has profoundly intensified.

On 12 December, the World Health Organisation (WHO) repeated its call for the protection of healthcare workers and humanitarian assistance in Gaza, as a result of military checkpoint delays and the detention of healthcare partners during a mission to transfer critically ill patients and deliver supplies to a hospital in northern Gaza. As the mission commenced, the UN convoy was inspected at the Wadi Gaza checkpoint, and ambulance crew members were required to leave the vehicles for purposes of identification. Two Palestine Red Crescent Society (PCRS) staff were detained for over an hour, further delaying the mission. WHO states that its staff witnessed one forced to kneel at gunpoint and taken out of sight, where he was reportedly harassed, beaten, stripped and searched. When the mission entered Gaza City, the aid truck carrying the medical supplies and one of the ambulances were hit by bullets. On the return towards southern Gaza, the convoy was stopped for the second time at the Wadi Gaza checkpoint, despite the critically ill patients from Al-Ahli Hospital in the ambulances. Security checks were once again instituted and PCRS staff and most of the patients had to step out of the ambulances. Critical patients remained in the ambulances, but were searched by armed soldiers.<sup>[1]</sup>

One of the same two PCRS staff that were temporarily detained at the beginning of the mission was taken for interrogation again. Despite numerous attempts by the mission to coordinate his release, a decision was taken two and a half hours later, based on the safety and well-being of the patients and humanitarian workers, to leave the highly dangerous area. In the process, one of the injured patients died as a result of his untreated wounds. Following joint UN efforts, the PCRS staff member was released later that night. WHO reports that he said he was harassed, beaten, threatened, stripped of his clothes and blindfolded. His hands were tied behind his back, and once released, he was left to walk towards the south without clothes or shoes, and his hands still tied behind his back. He was without doubt treated in a degrading and humiliating manner. WHO reports that this is just one of the many impediments to humanitarian missions in Gaza, which continue on a regular basis.<sup>[1]</sup>

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), in its Health Care in Danger (HCID) series, has made clear that violence against healthcare workers, facilities and vehicles is a humanitarian issue of critical concern. Healthcare services are most needed when fighting breaks out. However, it is at that time that they are most vulnerable to attack. Doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers, paramedics, hospitals, healthcare centres and even the wounded and sick may all come under attack, as we see in Gaza. The healthcare system is severely disrupted when people need it the most. The reason for death in this context is that people are prevented from receiving medical attention in time. Moreover, entire communities are cut-off from vital services

like maternity care and childcare. When the disruption is exceedingly severe, the entire system collapses.<sup>[2]</sup> The link between the incident described by the WHO above and the HCID series of the ICRC is obvious.

In this issue of SAJBL, three articles on the humanitarian crisis and the inviolability of healthcare, testing medical ethics at the core have all referred to genocide.<sup>[3-5]</sup> This term has been used almost daily over the past two months. So what exactly is genocide? The United Nations Convention On The Prevention And Punishment Of The Crime Of Genocide (1948) describes genocide as:<sup>[6]</sup>

*“any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:*

- (a) Killing members of the group;*
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;*
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;*
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;*
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group”*

The Convention states in its preamble that genocide has inflicted great losses on humanity throughout history. It also calls for international cooperation and solidarity to ‘liberate humankind from such an odious scourge.’ While this was called for in 1948, we have witnessed genocide several times over, with the latest being the situation in the Middle East. Despite the many laudable international documents, genocide continues.

‘The only thing necessary for the triumph of good over evil is that good people do nothing.’<sup>[7]</sup> Notwithstanding that good people all over the world have risen up against the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the situation worsens by the day. Will cruelty and hatred triumph?

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