
Health Care during the Intifada

by Itimad Musa

Among the images the Palestinian intifada has evoked, some of the more vivid show the injuries inflicted by the occupation forces: a nine-month-old baby girl stares blankly ahead with one eye, the other lost to a rubber bullet fired by an Israeli soldier; a bruised and bandaged young man beaten by troops raises two broken arms set in casts to make double victory signs. The struggle to tend the wounded, fight disease and malnutrition in communities frequently besieged and under curfew and, in general, raising and maintaining a healthy population is at the essence of the Palestinian struggle today. With the uprising well on the way to marking its third year, the protracted struggle is emphasizing the importance of issues like health care as vital battlegrounds which will affect the continuation of the intifada, and, beyond that, the future independent Palestinian state.

Historic battleground

From the beginning of the 1967 occupation, the Israeli authorities have targeted the health care infrastructure in their effort to create a dependent, submissive population. Meanwhile, the accompanying official propaganda about the health care situation in the occupied territories has lauded the «improved health» of the population, presumably as a result of the «enlightened occupation.» But reality tells another story. According to the Popular Committees for Health Services, one of the grass-roots medical committees operating in the occupied territories, several constraints and practices in force since 1967 have hindered the development of the health sector. These include the decline in the number of functional hospitals due to their being closed by the Israeli authorities or converted into detention centers. Coupled with this, prohibiting the expansion of existing hospitals and blocking the construction of new ones has led to a decrease in the ratio of hospital beds per population since 1967 from 1.9 to 1.2 per 1,000. In addition, medical equipment, supplies, work permits and training for health professionals have been consistently blocked by the authorities, creating a situation where even existing facilities are poorly equipped and under-staffed. While the cost of medical services has risen, Israel's expenditure on health services has dropped.

Major negative impact on the health of the occupied population comes as a result of nefarious negligence on the part of the authorities vis-a-vis the environment. Poor sanitation and contaminated water supplies are endemic in the occupied territories, such that leading causes of death among Palestinian children include diarrhea, intestinal and respiratory diseases. Clearly, creating a situation of deteriorating health conditions is part of the Israeli policy of encouraging «voluntary transfer» when Palestinians «choose» to emigrate because living conditions are unbearable.

The fight for Palestinian health care is as old as the occupation itself. But the intifada has heightened the stakes in all areas as the embattled population attempts to deal

with its grave medical needs, while asserting its control over this important aspect of life.

Among the major findings of the report issued during the first year of the uprising by the America-based organization Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) were the following two conclusions: 1.) The medical care system in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, of marginal adequacy to begin with, is being overwhelmed by the daily burden of serious trauma. It lacks the resources to deal with injury on this scale and is less and less able to meet the ordinary medical care needs of the population it serves, and 2.) The violence is not only producing injuries with serious short-term consequences. It is steadily creating a cohort of patients with serious long-term orthopedic, neurological and neuropsychiatric injuries. These patients will require prolonged physical and psychological rehabilitation, on a scale which massively outstrips presently available resources and facilities. These findings delineate at least two important issues facing health care workers in the occupied territories: how to respond to the serious medical situation resulting from Israel's attempts to crush the intifada, and what strategies need to be formulated so that Palestinians can look forward to a healthy future.

A young Palestinian, whose arms were broken by Israeli soldiers, in his hospital bed.

-Judith Gabriel

