



Gaza: “Staff at Al-Shifa are struggling to care for patients because the needs are huge”



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Last November, Al-Shifa hospital, located in Gaza City, Palestine was brought to a standstill after the Israeli army massively bombed the area around the facility. The hospital was hit several times, then surrounded before being evacuated. The largest hospital in the Gaza Strip was gradually transformed into a camp for displaced people, and now houses some 50,000 people. On site, the medical team is striving to maintain access to healthcare for people and has partially resumed their activities. Aurélie Godard, head of Médecins Sans Frontières’ (MSF) medical activities in Gaza, was able to visit the hospital as part of a supply convoy organised by the United Nations on 22 January. Here she provides an overview of she saw during her visit.

“The main objective of this convoy was to deliver 19,000 litres of fuel to Al-Shifa. This fuel is essential, because it is used to run the generators that supply the hospital with electricity. We managed to pass the checkpoint which separates north and south Gaza at the beginning of the afternoon, and immediately afterwards, our two cars and the fuel truck were surrounded by a crowd of quite young people who demanded water and food. They were really disappointed that we were only transporting fuel. We had a lot of difficulty getting through this very dense crowd of hungry people.”

Three operating rooms, but few resources

“Al-Shifa hospital is still standing, but it is badly damaged and barely functional. In the corridors, the false ceilings have been ripped open, and we have seen IV bags [to provide patients with drugs intravenously] hanging directly on the walls of the hospital, for lack of anything better. The medical teams on site managed to get the emergency room up and running, but it is largely occupied by patients who have been admitted. The rest of the hospital is filled with displaced people seeking safety.

"The health personnel manage to receive and triage the injured and stabilise them, but they are then a little stuck, because there is a severe shortage of hospital beds. Doctors have a resuscitation space, where people in life-threatening, critical condition can be treated; patients here either have a chronic illness, or, most often, because they have been injured by a bullet or in an explosion. During our visit, we regularly heard explosions not far from the hospital.

"The team at the hospital, made up of many volunteers, including two from MSF, managed to set up three operating rooms for urgent surgeries. We understood medical staff want to reopen the intensive care unit. Right now, they have no way to properly monitor the patients they manage to operate on.

"In the emergency room, we saw a seriously injured patient, who had arrived the day before. He had had a tracheotomy, a chest tube had been inserted and he also had had abdominal surgery. He was surrounded by dozens of other patients in a room without electricity, since there was a power outage at the time, and therefore his vital functions weren't being monitored, because the monitoring devices were not working. The team told us that they had recently lost a patient because they were unable to give him a blood transfusion. Their blood bank was empty. They work in terrible conditions."

Large cohort of patients

"Staff at Al-Shifa are struggling to care for patients because the needs are huge. There are a lot of people in the hospital and all around, made up mainly of those who are displaced. There are still many people living in northern Gaza, and many of them have suffered trauma related to war injuries, but also because of poor living conditions and winter illnesses.

"The number of patients is very high and medical staff have reported difficulties in many areas, whether with the supply of oxygen, electricity, medical equipment or simply food. All of this makes providing medical care extremely difficult, and they have enormous operating difficulties to overcome. The convoy's 19,000 litres of fuel will supply the hospital for barely a week. Around 3,000 litres per day are required for it to be functional.

"This visit was very short, as the journey from the south of the Gaza Strip took us a very long time, and we were not allowed to stay there for long. The convoy was supposed to go to the hospital five days earlier, but until then it was impossible for various reasons. It was moving to see the surprise of patients, displaced families and staff at the sight of new people. They had probably been holed up in the hospital for weeks."