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HUMANITARIAN FRONTLINE HEROES: DR. SULafa STRUGGLES TO PROVIDE MEDICAL SUPPLIES IN TIMES OF WAR

08 February 2024



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Dr. Sulafa, Pharmacy Manager and Drugstore Supervisor, stands in the pharmacy in UNRWA Tel al-Sultan Health Centre in Rafah in southern Gaza. © 2024 UNRWA Photo by Mohammed Hinnawi

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Dr. Sulafa is the Pharmacy Manager and Drugstore Supervisor at the UNRWA Tel al-Sultan Health Centre in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. For 18 years, through multiple rounds of violence and the tight blockade of



she has continued to serve the local Palestine Refugee community. "I work alone in the pharmacy for the first three days of every war," she said. "I would like to see the world join in to provide support for palestine refugees in the near east"

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THIS WAR WAS DIFFERENT AS THE LEVEL OF VIOLENCE KEPT EVENING UP. ON THE THIRD DAY OF HOSTILITIES, DR. SULafa WAS CALLED TO WORK IN THE PHARMACY TO PREPARE MEDICAL PACKAGES FOR DISTRIBUTION TO THE INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE (IDPs) IN UNRWA SHELTERS. DESPITE THE DRAMATIC ESCALATION IN VIOLENCE, SHE REPORTED FOR DUTY. "I DROVE MY CAR WITH FEAR AND EXTREME ANXIETY BECAUSE MY HOME WAS FAR AWAY FROM THE HEALTH CENTRE AND I HAD TO LEAVE MY FIVE CHILDREN AT HOME."

Yet, Dr. Sulafa did not hesitate and went to work. "I prepared 25 medical packages for use by the displaced people throughout the Gaza Strip. I was alone, preparing the packages with medicines and medical supplies such as sanitizers, medications, bandages," she said.

"As the pharmacy manager and drug store supervisor at Tel al-Sultan Health Centre, I requested urgent provision of insulin pens for insulin-dependent children. The use of regular needles, which are much longer than the child-friendly insulin pens, is scary for children who are already experiencing psychological trauma due to the war. Most children lose the insulin vials for the regular needles in the sand in their tents and refuse to take the injections daily. This is extremely dangerous," she noted.

The lack of insulin pens for children is the result of Israeli authorities adding them to the list of prohibited items that are not allowed into the besieged and war-torn Gaza Strip.

"I also requested the provision of psychological and neurological medications for children because I have witnessed firsthand children who are exhibiting severe mental distress due to the unavailability of treatment," said Dr. Sulafa.

Mental health and psychosocial support services resumed in late October 2023 in the Middle and Khan Younis areas, which include Rafah. A team of two psychiatrists, 20 counsellors and three supervisors assist patients with critical diagnoses that require psychiatric treatment, potentially including medication. Patients are referred to the team by shelters and health centres, like the one where Dr. Sulafa is based. Every week, the team deals with thousands of cases through individual consultations, awareness sessions and support for survivors of Gender-Based Violence.

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Internally Displaced Persons line up at the dispensary of the UNRWA Tel al-Sultan Health Centre in Rafah to get much-needed medication. © 2024 UNRWA Photo by Mohammed Hinnawi

“I believe that collaborative efforts between international and local organizations, as well as the commitment of the international community to provide necessary support to pharmacies and health-care facilities in affected areas can contribute to improving access to health care and providing essential medicines to patients,” said Dr. Sulafa. Partnerships have proven to be a vital part of UNRWA’s effective health-care response. For example, on 11 January, UNRWA received eight distinct types of vaccines from UNICEF for its health centres. On the first day, UNRWA was able to vaccinate a total of 768 children against diseases such as measles, mumps and rubella, and others.

“As a pharmacy supervisor, I face daily challenges in providing such medicines and even basic medical supplies to patients, which can impact patients who rely on those treatments to stay alive or improve their health conditions,” she says.

She is one of 531 UNRWA health-care staff still serving the community in the Gaza Strip despite the risks the war poses to them and their loved ones. As of 22 January, only four out of 22 UNRWA health centres in Gaza,

including the Tel al-Sultan Health Centre, are still operational.
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Dr. Sulafa (left), Pharmacy Manager and Drugstore Supervisor, meets with UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini (centre). © 2024 UNRWA Photo by Mohammed Hinnawi

As part of one of his several visits to Gaza since the war began in October 2023, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini met with Dr. Sulafa to convey his appreciation for her dedication. UNRWA salutes the more than 3,000 staff in Gaza currently reporting for duty even though most have been displaced from their homes.



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