

Thurs., November 9, 2023

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, P.C., M.P.
Prime Minister of Canada

Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

Dear Prime Minister Justin Trudeau,

I am writing to you on behalf of Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to urgently request that the Canadian Government do everything within its power to achieve an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Ending the indiscriminate violence is the only way to prevent more deaths and scale up desperately needed humanitarian assistance.

My colleagues and I, like so many Canadians, were aggrieved and outraged by Hamas' deliberate and unconscionable attack on Israeli civilians. We are now horrified by Israel's incessant and indiscriminate attacks on Palestinian civilians and civilian spaces, including hospitals, in Gaza.

The relentless killings, destruction of essential infrastructure and withholding of items including water and medicines essential for survival amount to brazen and repeated violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). IHL remains the clearest expression of our global agreement to preserve a space for humanity in war. For governments committed to this principle and legal framework, including Canada, now is the time to defend it wholeheartedly and unequivocally.

Canada must call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

Over two weeks ago, an MSF doctor in Gaza bluntly stated that "the health system is about to fail." It is now failing. MSF medics in Gaza confirm that several hundreds of people are still being injured or killed every day of which an estimated 800-1000 are reaching hospitals. The hospitals - those still functioning - are "overwhelmed" and under "unimaginable duress."

Essential medical supplies like gauze, painkillers and clean water have run out, leaving wounded patients in agony and exposed to infection. One MSF doctor describes using vinegar to treat infections. Generator fuel has run dry in some hospitals, putting an end to key lifesaving activities. "Without electricity," an MSF medic explained, "many patients will die, especially those in intensive care, neonatology and on respiratory support machines."

In one hospital, an MSF doctor depicts a chaotic scene in which wards are no longer distinct as patients and caretakers occupy every room, stairwell and open space. The only room still serving its original function is the operating theatre, but that service is hopelessly inundated. In one instance, medics amputated a nine-year-old boy's lower limb in the hospital's hallway with mild sedation and inadequate instruments. His injured 13-year-old sister watched in horror as she waited her turn.

The fundamental rule of IHL, to which Israel is signatory, is that civilians must be at all times distinguished from combatants and measures taken to protect them. The huge number of children whose wounds we have treated or bodies we have delivered to hospital morgues obliterates any notion that adequate precautions are being taken to protect civilians.

IHL is also explicitly clear that hospitals and medical personnel must be protected. Yet between Oct. 7 and Nov. 4, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported 102 attacks on healthcare staff, facilities and ambulances in Gaza. My colleagues – over 300 of them in Gaza - estimate that tens of thousands of people have sought not only medical care but safety inside hospital grounds. Attacks on those hospitals are attacks on humanity.

Canada recently called for a humanitarian “pause” in Gaza, but this is not a solution. A “pause” implies that violence and bombing will resume. Thus far, the actions of world leaders, including in Canada, have been too weak and too slow to stem the relentless bloodshed, and atrocities are still being committed every day. A total and immediate ceasefire is the only humane option.

MSF emergency medical teams stand ready - along with trucks of medical supplies - to enter Gaza and scale up humanitarian assistance as soon as possible. We must be able to assure their safety. Thousands of patients and our exhausted colleagues in Gaza desperately need their support.

“We did what we could. Remember us.” These are the words my MSF emergency doctor colleague wrote on a Gaza hospital whiteboard where we used to write the weekly list of surgical cases. Just this week, one of my Palestinian colleagues, Mohammed Al Ahel, was killed. Mohammed was an MSF laboratory technician. He lost his life when the house he was staying at with several members of his family in the Al Shate refugee camp was bombed. How many more colleagues, health workers and civilians will we need to mourn before the international community takes action to protect them?

I call on you and the Canadian Government to do more than just remember healthcare workers and patients in Gaza when it is too late.

Take action to uphold our shared humanity by demanding an immediate ceasefire.

Sincerely,



Joseph Belliveau
Executive Director
Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières Canada