

Update on the situation in Gaza from The Rt Revd Suheil Dawani, Bishop of Jerusalem

Jerusalem, January 7th, 2009 - At a time when great tragedy is occurring in the Holy Land in Gaza, I want to share some insight into what we are experiencing on a moment to moment basis. Our Diocese has one of 11 hospitals serving a population of 1.5 million residents in the Gaza Strip. The Al Ahli Arab (Anglican) Hospital has been in operation for over 100 years and has a very dedicated medical staff of doctors, nurses, technicians and general services personnel.

During the best of times they are stretched to their maximum meeting the medical needs of this populous community. Now, during the current military conflict with its heavy toll on human life and material, the hospital faces even greater responsibilities and challenges. The result is growing strain on the hospital's resources. Every day since the beginning of military operations, the hospital has received 20-40 injured or wounded patients. A large proportion of them require hospitalization and surgery. These patients are in addition to those with non-conflict-related illnesses. About one-fourth of the patients are children.

In addition, the conflict has brought new type of medical and surgical conditions. For example, patients with burns and acute, crippling psychological trauma, are being seen more frequently. Because it is not possible for aid workers to enter Gaza at this time, the hospital's staff is working around the clock, struggling with the effects of exhaustion and against limited resources in a conflicted area of ongoing military operations.

Many medical items are needed, especially bandages and supplies for burns and trauma. The hospital's windows have all been blown out or shattered from rocket and missile concussion and cold permeates the entire premises. Plastic sheeting to cover the windows could alleviate some of the cold but is unavailable now. Food supplies are scant throughout the Gaza strip and maintaining patients' nutritional needs at the hospital has been difficult, especially for the most vulnerable. Some medicines and supplies for the hospital have been generously donated by US AID, but it has not yet been possible to deliver the items.

Efforts to help alleviate some of the shortages are underway and we hope that the shipments will arrive quickly. Through the ICRC limited amounts of diesel fuel are being delivered to keep the electrical generators functional for life saving and other essential equipment. We are working with a number of related governmental and international voluntary agencies to speed up the delivery and steady supply of needed medicines and food. We are also working to ensure to the fullest extent possible the physical safety of the Hospital staff and campus.

On a "normal" day, approximately 600 life line trucks a day bring supplies to the Gaza Strip. Many are under the auspices of UNRWA and international relief agencies because about two-thirds of Gaza's residents are Refugees and living in UNRWA Camps. During this time of conflict, that number of trucks is not seen in a week or more. Because of the reduced deliveries, medical items, nutritional food, and other basic supplies are now scarce items, if available at all, for our brothers and sisters in Gaza.

I ask you to join with me in prayer and by offering whatever financial support you can for our Hospital and heroic Staff of the Al Ahli Hospital - and other such humanitarian endeavors. Thankfully the Hospital plant remains intact at this time. While several among our Staff have suffered loss and injuries within their own families, they are representing all of us as a witness of God's love to all people - "come unto to me all you who are heavy laden and I will refresh you". As we continue to pray for communal Palestinian and Israeli PEACE, we especially remember these dedicated individuals who cannot leave, but most importantly do not want to leave, but continue to do all they can to help.

Our Lord's imperative in St. John's Gospel during this Epiphany season gives each of us the new hope for a new dawn of light, life and communal conciliation - "I have come that you may have Life and have it abundantly".

Bishop Dawani is Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem.

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http://www.j-diocese.org/contact_us?th=2