

The state of siege in the Gaza Strip leads to a serious epidemic emergency

SESPAS (Spanish Society for Public Health and Health Administration) considers that reducing the frequency and intensity of armed conflict is not only a stated goal of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, but a necessary cross-cutting issue for human well-being and progress. Conflict and violence have resulted in loss of life, but also in damage to health systems, limited access to health services and the resurgence of infectious diseases in violent conflicts. Through this lens, peace is a key structural determinant of health, an approach endorsed by the WHO in the contextual frameworks of health determinants. With this conviction, as health professionals, we denounce the injustices of wars and armed conflicts. The conflicts in Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Sudanese civil war and the war between Israel and Hamas stand out in 2023 and are an example of the irreversible impact on the public health of these populations.

The use of measures that directly undermine the health of a territory as a weapon of war is particularly serious and represents a violation of the human rights of the people who live there. This is the case in the Gaza Strip. Depriving a population of 2.26 million people of water and electricity and limiting access to supplies as much as possible are actions that will inevitably lead to an epidemic catastrophe and, for this reason, we are preparing a document that, with scientific rigour, details and explains the consequences of these actions. In the meantime, in our conception of health as a public good that must be defended on a global scale, the extraordinary nature of the situation forces us to speak out.

The European Union has issued a communiqué (15-10-2023) in which it expresses, on the one hand, Israel's right to defend itself and, on the other, the importance of guaranteeing the protection of all civilians, as well as providing urgent humanitarian aid to the Gaza population.

From SESPAS we express our concern and the need for this EU communiqué to be translated into urgent and specific measures so that it does not remain empty of content. Israel's response to the brutal and unacceptable attack by Hamas through the blockade of essential services to the general population, and the admonition to evacuate the territory under the threat of a military invasion, violates the minimum ethical values that a State must respect, and is already an enormous public health problem for the Palestinian population - particularly for the most vulnerable people, such as children, pregnant women and the elderly - which may worsen even more, to horrifying extremes, apart from the thousands of deaths already caused by the bombings and other military actions.

It is necessary to emphasise that:

- The pre-war basic services situation in the Strip was already weak, with problems, for example, of access to drinking water due to the depletion and contamination of natural aquifers and a highly saturated health care network.
- The greater the vulnerability, the greater the risk. The majority of the population is under age, making them more vulnerable to all forms of deprivation and aggression, both

physical and mental, as are the elderly and pregnant women. Furthermore, there is evidence that women show greater suffering and post-traumatic stress in all war conflicts.

- There is no possibility of evacuation to safe areas because the population is encircled by both Israel and Egypt.

- Water and energy shortages, if not addressed, in a densely populated area (5,000-10,000 inhabitants/km²) such as the Gaza Strip, will affect not only drinking water but also sanitation and water purification. The WHO and UNRWA have denounced this critical situation and currently the per capita water availability is 3% of the daily recommendation. This will inevitably lead in the short term to dehydration and the emergence of oral-fecal transmitted diseases such as dysentery, amongst others, with a high rate of spread.

- The health care network is lacking in electricity, personnel and supplies of medical equipment and medicines to treat the injured and combat epidemics. The spread of infectious diseases would therefore have no chance of being controlled in the short term.

For all these reasons, the European Union's declaration to guarantee the protection of all civilians implies, without exception, actions aimed at maintaining the supply of drinking water, energy for essential services and basic nutritional, health care and hygiene supplies. These supplies and their blockade should never be used as a weapon of war, nor can they be subjected to the political or tactical vagaries of any of the parties involved. On the other hand, given the irreparable damage to the civilian population on both sides, SESPAS urges the Spanish and European authorities to influence the United Nations and other international political actors to contribute to the cessation of hostilities and respect for the Geneva Conventions and the international law of non-combatants. We also believe that a public health emergency declaration by the WHO could contribute to highlighting the scale of the seriousness of the epidemic in the making and to rallying the will to resolve it.

This position is endorsed by the following societies of the Spanish Society of Public Health and Health Administration (SESPAS): AEC, AMaSaP, REAP, SASPAS-HIPATIA, SCSP, SEE, SESA