

Yuli Edelstein

Israel Ministry of Health
39 Yirmiyahu St.
P.O.Box 1176
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Sent via email

19 February 2021

Dear Mr Edelstein

Palestinian access to COVID-19 vaccine

We are writing on behalf of the BMA (British Medical Association) to express our grave concern regarding the ability of Palestinian territories in Gaza and the West Bank to access the COVID-19 vaccine due to the actions of the Israeli authorities.

It has been widely reported that on 15 February 2021 the Israeli government prevented a vital first shipment of 2,000 coronavirus vaccines intended for frontline health workers from entering the blockaded Gaza Strip.¹ The BMA also notes, with alarm, that during a parliamentary debate on 15 February 2021, a number of Israeli lawmakers expressed the view that vaccines should only be allowed to enter Gaza if concessions are given by Hamas, including the return of captives. If true, this would compound the concerns raised by numerous human rights groups regarding Palestinian vaccine access.²

We note the responsibility of Occupying Powers regarding healthcare during pandemics under Article 56 of the Fourth Geneva Convention that “the Occupying Power has the duty of ensuring and maintaining, with the cooperation of national and local authorities, the medical and hospital establishments and services, public health and hygiene in the occupied territory, with particular reference to the adoption and application of the prophylactic and preventive measures necessary to combat the spread of contagious diseases and epidemics”. Israel, by not allowing Palestine to access the vaccine, is in violation of international law. This has also been

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/16/israel-blocked-covid-vaccines-from-entering-gaza-say-palestinians>

² <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/joint-statement-10-israeli-palestinian-and-international>

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raised by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967.³

The World Health Organization's declaration on vaccine equity makes clear the need to accelerate the vaccination of all healthcare workers across the world.⁴ This is particularly cogent with respect to low-income countries, including Palestine. Not only is this necessary to stop the spread of the virus globally, it is also an important recognition of the role and risk every healthcare worker is undertaking across the world.

The BMA echoes the call of UN human rights experts for Israel to ensure equal access to the COVID-19 vaccine for Palestinians. At the bare minimum, vaccine deliveries intended for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank should not face obstacles. But additionally, Israel must comply with its obligations under international humanitarian law and the Fourth Geneva Convention.

Yours sincerely,



Dr John Chisholm CBE
Chair, BMA medical ethics committee



Dr Kitty Mohan
Chair, BMA international committee

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26655>

⁴ <https://www.who.int/campaigns/annual-theme/year-of-health-and-care-workers-2021/vaccine-equity-declaration>