Anglican hospital in Gaza resumes treating patients after evacuation order

by David Paulsen
July 15, 2024

Al Ahli Arab Hospital has been open since 1882. (Photo by Mary Frances Schjonberg/Episocpal News Service)

Al Ahli Arab Hospital, an Anglican-run hospital in Gaza City, reopened last week "despite intense military activity in the area," the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem said in a statement. On July 7, Israel Defense Forces declared the neighborhood around the hospital a "red zone," ordering the hospital to close and for all patients and staff to be evacuated.

"Some staff were able to return" on July 11 and had performed eight surgeries that day, the diocese said, though "most patients and others in need of medical attention have not yet been able to make the same hazardous journey."

The hospital, a core ministry of the Jerusalem-based Anglican province in the Middle East, has struggled alongside other Gazan health care providers to meet the needs

of injured Palestinians under the Israeli military's bombardment of the territory since Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel.

Early in the Israel-Hamas war, Al Ahli Hospital, while dealing with power outages and food and water shortages, continued to provide emergency treatment to Gazans displaced by violence as Israel ordered Palestinians in Northern Gaza to evacuate south.

Then on July 7, the Israeli military began ordering new evacuations from neighborhoods in Northern Gaza near Al Ahli Hospital, orders that a United Nations agency warned would "only fuel mass suffering for Palestinian families" who have been living through repeated displacements.

"These civilians must be protected—and their essential needs must be met, whether they flee or stay," the UN relief coordination office said.

The Diocese of Jerusalem responded July 8 by condemning Israel's latest evacuation orders and subsequent drone strikes on the area, which it said had forced the diocese to temporarily close the hospital.

"In a time of warfare and great suffering it is essential that emergency healthcare services are maintained to treat the injured and the dying," Archbishop Hosam Naoum said. "We appeal to the Israeli forces to permit us to continue our sacred ministry of medical care and healing. We plead for an end to the targeting of civilians and all vulnerable people and demand all parties agree to an immediate ceasefire."

The Israel Defense Forces responded by denying it had ordered the closure of the hospital. The military told Reuters that it had advised civilians in some parts of Gaza City to flee, to minimize the risk to their lives, while also making clear that it was unnecessary to evacuate hospitals. The Reuters report did not specify how the Israeli military intended to safeguard hospitals while potentially threatening the lives of those in the surrounding neighborhoods.

In the update posted July 13 to its Facebook page, the Diocese of Jerusalem praised "the dedication and courage of our staff" for allowing Al Ahli Hospital to reopen. It also noted that a hospital ambulance had been fired on and severely damaged by a sniper, but the driver was unharmed and able to return safely to the hospital. No patients were in the ambulance at the time.

Al Ahli Hospital has been on the front lines of the humanitarian response to the crisis in the territory. On October 17, as Palestinians sought refuge from Israeli airstrikes in the hospital's courtyard, the courtyard was hit by a deadly blast, with unverified casualty estimates in the hundreds. Hamas blamed an Israeli airstrike, though the Israeli military said it had evidence that an errant Palestinian rocket was behind the blast. United States officials said their analysis supported Israel's explanation.

Israel had declared war on Hamas after the armed Palestinian militant group, which controls Gaza, launched a coordinated, cross-border attack on communities in southern Israel on October 7, massacring more than 1,200 Israeli civilians and taking an estimated 200 more hostage, some of whom are still being held by Hamas.

Israel's military responded aggressively to Hamas's surprise attack, first with airstrikes and then a ground invasion, further contributing to the chaos and humanitarian crisis among the more than 2 million who live in Gaza. The Palestinian death toll is nearing 40,000, according to the Hamas-led Health Ministry.

Israel and Hamas face increasing global pressure to reach a cease-fire agreement, though disagreements over the conditions of a cease-fire have slowed progress in those talks. —Episcopal News Service