

SA v. Israel: Accusations spotlight "danger for the historically protected position of healthcare workers" worldwide

By  Katja Hamilton

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Irrespective of the origins of the conflict in Gaza, a fundamental breach is evident: the explicit violation of international rules of engagement that safeguard healthcare workers and facilities, even in times of bitter hostility.



Source: Reuters.

This was the message of Sarah Galle of *Artsen Voor Gaza* (Doctors for Gaza), which gathered outside the international Court of Justice in the Netherlands on Thursday, 11 January 2024, where pro-Palestine protesters gathered to support South Africa's case accusing Israel of genocide in Gaza.

The state called on the court to order Israel to cease military operations in Gaza.

Israel, which is set to present its defense on Friday, 12 January, has strongly denied South Africa's accusations.

"Even when people are the worst enemies and hate each other - and wage war against each other - they should be exempt

from the violence," Galle said. "The rules of engagement are still clear. And [Israel] still has a duty to protect its civilians and to not strike out at hospitals. That rule is being broken here."

Galle said there was a lot hanging on the outcome of South Africa's landmark case against Israel. "We see [what is happening to Palestinians in Gaza] not only as a humanitarian crisis, but also as a danger for the historically protected position of healthcare workers all over the world."

Medics face relentless bombing

Adila Hassim, one of the lawyers representing South Africa at The Hague, recounted in detail on Thursday, 11 January 2024, how healthcare workers in Gaza are subjected to relentless bombing wherever they go. "They are killed in their homes, in places where they seek shelter, in schools, mosques and churches – even refugee camps - and hospitals," she said.

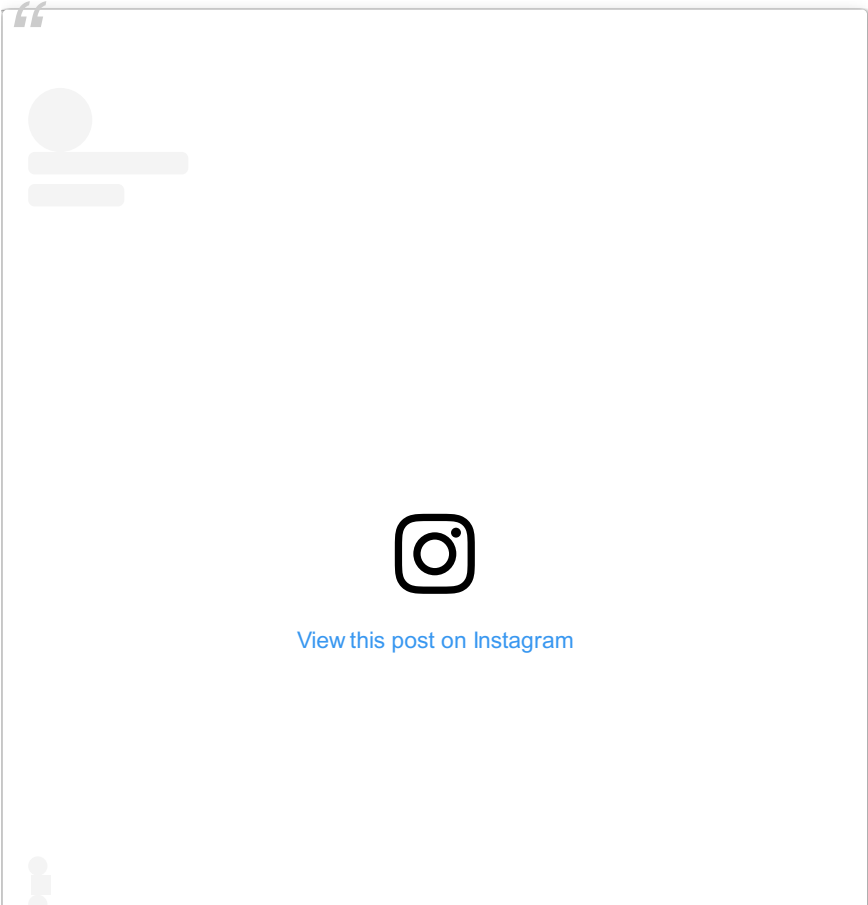
"Furthermore, those hospitals that are still partially functional are overwhelmed with trauma cases, and inundated by desperate people seeking safety."

On average, three medics are dying a day in Gaza, and those medics in the proverbial trenches are being denied access to life-saving medicine and equipment.

Hassim explains how, on Wednesday, 8 January 2024, Israeli authorities denied the delivery of urgent medical supplies and vital fuel to a medical hospital and medical-supply centre in Gaza.

"This marked the fifth denial of admission to the centre since 26 December, [2023], leaving five hospitals in northern Gaza without access to life-saving medical supplies and equipment," she said.

The legal representatives for South Africa at the Hague noted the longstanding exposure of the population in Gaza to a situation of vulnerability, including hindrances to the importation of essential goods causing shortages of food, medicine, and other life-saving medical supplies.





And the situation does not look to abate anytime soon, Hassim added.

She spoke of 2,000-pound bombs - some of the biggest and most destructive bombs available - being dropped by lethal fighter jets on Palestinians in Gaza, wielded by "one of the world's most resourced armies". Israel continues to target these attacks on infrastructure essential for survival, she said.

Soaring casualties

Blinne in Ghralaigh, also part of the legal team representing South Africa at The Hague, said, based on the current figures, an average of 247 Palestinians are being killed - and are at risk of being killed - each day, "many of them literally blown to pieces". They include 48 mothers - two every hour and over 117 children each day.

"Each day an average of 629 people will be wounded, some multiple times over as they move from place to place desperately seeking sanctuary," she said. "Entire multigenerational families will be obliterated.

"More Palestinian children will become a W C N S F - Wounded Child - No Surviving Family: the terrible new acronym borne out of Israel's genocidal assault on the Palestinian population in Gaza."

And the burden on healthcare workers in Gaza will increase: While first responders have spent the last three months without international assistance - trying to excavate families out of the rubble with their bare hands - experts warn of a new threat, said Ghralaigh.

Deaths of Palestinians in Gaza as a result of disease, they say, will significantly outstrip the number of deaths from bombings in Gaza.

"A public health disaster is unfolding in Gaza: Infectious diseases are spreading in overcrowded shelters as sewers spill over." Ghralaigh noted The World Health Organization had confirmed that "Gaza is experiencing soaring rates of infectious disease outbreaks".

"Cases of diarrhoea in children under five years of age have increased 2,000% since hostilities began which - when combined and left untreated - can lead to a deadly cycle of malnutrition and disease."

Doctors' urgent plea

Doctors for Gaza's Sarah Galle is a poignant voice amidst the turmoil. She underscores a moral imperative ingrained in international law, which asserts that even when nations are waging war against one another, there exists an obligation to exempt healthcare workers and facilities from violence.

The clarity of these rules of engagement emphasises the duty to protect civilians and prohibits the targeting of hospitals, she said. Yet, in the current conflict, this crucial rule is being shattered, with profound consequences for the people of Gaza and a direct impact on the heroic medics striving to save lives amidst the chaos.

"We have no control whether people will heed that message. But I think it's important to let [Israel] know that we are not blind to what's going on - that we see how the healthcare workers [in Gaza] are struggling."

To date, 23,210 Palestinians - at least 70% of whom are believed to be women and children - have been killed in Gaza by Israeli forces during sustained attacks over the last three months.

Moreover, an estimated 7,000 Palestinian men, women and children are reported missing, Ghralaigh confirmed. "They're presumed dead - or dying a slow, excruciating death, trapped under the rubble."

ABOUT KATJA HAMILTON

Katja is the Finance, Property and Healthcare Editor at Bizcommunity.

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