

The war on Gaza. A test of our humanity

It is painfully difficult to write something about the war on Gaza, for no matter what I write, it will be denounced by one side or the other with accusations of bigotry, bias, anti-Semitism, emotional, etc. However, to remain silent would suggest complicity and support for the violation of international humanitarian law and justice. As a South African of colour, who was a victim of the oppressive Apartheid regime, I can not remain silent, because *'If you are (I am) neutral in a situation of injustice, you (I) have chosen the side of the oppressor'* (South African Nobel Peace Laureate, Archbishop Desmond Tutu). That iconic dissenting voice of our 'Founding Father' of the liberation struggle echoes through the ages that *'We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of Palestinians.'* (Nelson Mandela, South African Nobel Laureate of Peace and Human Rights). So, like Steve Biko, leader of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in South Africa (SA) *I (too choose to) write what I like.*^[1]

The occupation of Palestine has been ongoing since the founding of the Zionist State of Israel in 1948. What followed over seven decades, is a carefully-planned manifest of extermination,^[2] ethnic-cleansing and the displacement of the occupied indigenous populations of Palestine.^[3] There has been a series of major wars fought between 1948 – 2009.^[4] In the 2014 war, the death toll among Palestinians from the massive Israeli bombardments of the Gaza Strip created a humanitarian crisis.^[5] But the death toll from that and all previous wars in Gaza pales in comparison to the death toll of the current war in Gaza, which commenced on the 7th October 2023.^[4] It is the deadliest of all previous wars on Gaza.

It is not easy to collect statistics in war zones because they are constantly changing. Now in its seventh week, the 'War on Gaza' has displaced more than 1.5 million Palestinians internally, and killed more than 12 000 non-combatants, including 5 000 children, 4 000 women, 202 healthcare workers (HCWs) and 51 journalists.^[6,7] Approximately 30 000 Palestinians have been injured, 3 640 are still missing, presumably under the rubble. Twenty-five hospitals and 55 ambulances are out of commission.^[6,7] The siege on Gaza has severely restricted supplies of food, water, electricity, medical supplies, internet and fuel to the 2.3 million residents of the Gaza Strip.^[6,7] With no access to electricity, food, clean water and proper sanitation there are growing concerns of starvation and the spread of communicable diseases.^[6,7]

It is painfully unbearable and heartbreaking to watch the videos on the deaths of infants and children, as they are removed from underneath the rubble of collapsed buildings, or neonates disconnected from life-saving incubators, simply because the power has been cut off by Israel. For what crimes are the children of Palestine being murdered? Do Palestinian lives not matter? Are they simply 'collateral damage' of war? More than 50% of Palestinians killed in Gaza are children. To-date over 5 000 children have been reported to have died because of Israel's continuous bombardments.^[4,6,7] Over 420 children are killed or injured each day, and a further 1 250 are missing, presumed buried, under destroyed or damaged buildings. That's more than 100 children killed every day, an average of one child every 15 minutes.^[4,6,7] The number of children killed in this war has surpassed the annual number of children killed in global conflict zones every year since 2019. It is by far the most deadliest war for children.^[8]

Children are legally protected by international humanitarian laws and conventions in wars and armed conflicts.^[9] Accordingly, states are obliged to abide by these laws and to take measures to ensure the protection and care of children affected by armed conflict.^[10] Yet, Israel openly violates these international laws by preventing access to hospitals and healthcare, and the deprivation of food, water, power and access to life-saving incubators to neonates and children.^[11] Israel's war on the children of Gaza is the most deadliest war in modern times^[8] so much so, that Gaza is becoming a graveyard for children.^[12] What we are witnessing is ethnic cleansing and a genocide in real time.^[2,3]

A coalition of Palestinian human rights groups, political analysts and activists, human rights organisations, and academics including the SA government have filed a lawsuit with the international criminal court (ICC), urging the body to investigate Israel for breach of International Conventions, Humanitarian laws, as well as, genocide.^[13-16] In any civilised society, the balance between medical ethics and human rights is critical for the delivery of healthcare.^[9,13-16] The deliberate murder of HCWs and obstructing their attempts to deliver care, interrupting and destroying civilian infrastructure, such as hospitals and clinics, deliberately targeting services that support healthcare, such as electricity, fuel, medicines, water and sanitation, are criminal and illegal.^[9] They are in direct contravention of several conventions, statutes, occupational law, international and humanitarian law, all of which assure the protection of healthcare personnel, healthcare facilities and the most vulnerable (children and women) in occupied territories and conflict zones.^[9] Combatant states who violate these international conventions and laws, codes of ethics during war and conflict, which are detrimental to civilian non-combatants (healthcare workers, women and children and the elderly) commit crimes against humanity.^[9,13-16] The ICC is obliged to investigate and prosecute all those who allegedly commit, or are complicit in war crimes in Gaza, irrespective of who they are, if the ICC wishes to not be seen as 'spineless', 'biased' or 'partisan'.

The stance we take on the War on Gaza as a human species, is a test of our morality, a stand against racism and apartheid, our privileges and human values. *It is not a test for us. We have already passed the test. It is a test for the rest of the world* (A Palestinian, Anon). It is a test of our humanity.

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