

PCHR Organizes Conference on “Promotion of Right to Health and Access to Healthcare”

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On Tuesday, 26 December 2017, the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR) organized a conference titled “Promotion of Right to Health and Access to Healthcare”. The conference aimed at promoting the right to health and access to healthcare. It also displayed the urgent developments related to medical referrals abroad, Israeli restrictions imposed on travel to and from the Gaza Strip, and denying patients their right to receive medical treatment. The conference was attended by a group of specialists representing the Palestinian Ministry of Health, international organizations, civil society organizations, including human rights organizations, patients and their families and media representatives.

Lawyer Raji Sourani, Director of PCHR, opened the conference and pointed out that the conference comes in the context of the escalation of the Israeli authorities practices against patients in the Gaza Strip, who are referred abroad for treatment, and denying them travel to receive treatment. Sourani said that such practices are considered inhumane exploitation of the pain and suffering of patients and their families.

Sourani added that the policy of blackmailing the patients, bargaining them, and exploiting their need for treatment, is considered a grave status of humiliating and degrading treatment. Sourani also said that Israel's recruitment for its security services to blackmail the patients is considered the most horrible, illegal and immoral practices that will be added to their black record.



Fadel al-Muzaini, a researcher at PCHR, gave a presentation of a report titled: "Bargaining on Pain", issued by PCHR. Muzaini reviewed the deterioration of healthcare in the Gaza Strip, patient' need to receive treatment abroad, Israeli restrictions imposed on their travel to and from the Gaza Strip, and denying patients their right to receive medical treatment. Muzaini also showed statistics for the number of patients, who faced obstacles in their treatment, due to the Israeli restrictions imposed during the years 2007-2017, and PCHR's role in providing assistance to these patients. Moreover, he discussed patients' right to travel and access to healthcare from a human rights

perspective, and then explained the Israel's responsibilities towards the Gaza Strip population, including allowing each patient access to the treatment he needs.

Medhat Muhassin, Assistant Undersecretary of Health Ministry, delivered a speech on "The need of Gaza Strip patients for treatment abroad and the Ministry of Health mechanisms". In his speech, he discussed the patients' suffering due to the Israeli policies represented in preventing patients from receiving treatment abroad and blackmailing them during their access to Beit Hanoun "Erez" Crossing, north of the Gaza Strip. He also pointed out that the rate of patients, who are denied their right to receive medical treatment abroad, is increasing in light of the Israeli tightened closure imposed on the Gaza Strip.



Rif'at Muhassin, Director of the Coordination and Liaison Department in the Ministry of Health, reviewed the Israeli restrictions concerning raising the age of the patients' security check from 16 to 35 during the past years to 16-55 during this year. This leads to serious risks on the patients' health conditions, especially those who need urgent medical referral to receive treatment. He added that the Coordination Department managed, through communicating with the Israeli authorities and after great efforts, to reduce the age of Patients' companions to 45 years, which is not enough. He pointed out that the rate of the Israeli approvals for patients' requests does not exceed 50% of

cases.

Tareq Mkheimar, Director of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)'s Department, confirmed on his speech that the Israeli authorities is an occupying force that practices effective control on land, sea, and air. It also fails to abide by international conventions, particularly its obligations towards the Gaza Strip population concerning describing the Gaza Strip as an occupied territory. The occupied authorities also impose restrictions on the travel of Palestinian patients without a legal justification and without posing any threat to Israel.

Mohammed Lafi, Coordinator of the World Health Organization (WHO) Advocacy Project, stressed on his speech about WHO's role in promoting patients' right to access to healthcare that the WHO works on monitoring the health condition in Palestine and provides support to the Ministry of Health. The WHO also documents the violations against the right to health, including obstructing the travel of patients referred for medical treatment abroad. Lafi pointed out that the WHO contacts with all parties related to the patients' medical treatment abroad to coordinate and facilitate their travel. Despite all the efforts, the results are not satisfying as the patients referred to receive medical treatment abroad still face large difficulties.

In his speech, 'Aed Yaghi, Director of the Palestinian Medical Relief Society (PMRS) in the Gaza Strip, emphasized the civil society organizations' role in enhancing patients' right to access to healthcare. Yaghi stressed that the Israeli practices against the patients referred for treatment abroad are violation to their right to receive medical treatment and access to healthcare. The Israeli practices also pose a threat to patients' lives, especially that most of the patients referred abroad suffer serious diseases and there is no treatment for them in the Gaza Strip. Yaghi called for putting pressure on the Israeli authorities to stop such practices against the patients and ending the Israeli closure imposed on the Gaza Strip. He also called for enabling all civilians, including patients, to travel and access to medical treatment facilities.

At the end of the conference, Khalil Shaheen, Director of PCHR's Economic and Social Rights Unit, opened up the discussion for the participants, who made interventions and asked questions. The participants concluded a number of recommendations; in which they called upon the international community to:

1. Put pressure on Israel to end its policy of imposing severe restrictions against the Gaza Strip patients referred for treatment abroad and denied their right to travel and receive medical treatment;
2. Remove obstacles practiced by the Israeli authorities through which they deliberately deny the Gaza strip patients their right to travel abroad for medical treatment;
3. Allow all the patients, who suffer severe diseases and there is no medical treatment for them in the Gaza Strip hospitals, to travel and access to the hospitals, where they are referred to, for medical treatment and without any delay;
4. Immediately end the discrimination policy between patients, whose lives need to be rescued and patients, who need to improve their lives' medical condition, according to the Israeli authorities' classification; and
5. Open the crossings designated to supplying the Gaza Strip with basic needs and enable them work freely so that the medical facilities can obtain all the medical needs such as medicines, equipment and medical devices.



