

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 3, 2024

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden,

We appreciate your efforts to address the humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip, but the United States can and must do more. That includes reiterating that all parties to the conflict must follow international humanitarian law – that Hamas must release all the remaining hostages, and Israel must permit significantly more humanitarian aid into Gaza. The U.S. has the resources to provide significantly more aid and prevent further suffering of the two million Palestinians displaced in Gaza.<sup>1</sup>

In February, we called on the administration to immediately implement “Operation Gaza Relief” to provide urgent humanitarian aid to Gaza. Operation Gaza Relief would advance U.S. foreign policy goals, including providing life-saving food, water, and other basic necessities to those trapped in the crossfire of an ongoing armed conflict. The most urgent concern we raised was the need to “supply desperately needed medicine and medical equipment.”<sup>2</sup> At the time, we wrote that “the 11 partially functional hospitals remaining in Gaza” were unable to provide adequate care,<sup>3</sup> and we urged your administration to “mobilize and support airlifts to provide those hospitals with supplies including basic medicines, from antibiotics to insulin.”<sup>4</sup> The crisis on the ground has only worsened after Israeli raids on hospitals,<sup>5</sup> and continued fighting has created fuel shortages that put hospitals out of commission.<sup>6</sup> Doctors now worry that their only options are “displacement, detention or death.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> NPR, “What Palestinians in Gaza may fear even more than Israeli bombardment,” Lauren Frayer, January 17, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/17/1224889340/gaza-palestinian-displacement-israel-war>.

<sup>2</sup> Washington Post, Opinion, “The U.S. should immediately mobilize ‘Operation Gaza Relief,’” Senators Jeff Merkley, Dick Durbin, Elizabeth Warren, Chris Van Hollen, and Peter Welch, February 16, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/02/16/israel-gaza-aid-senators-merkley-durbin-warren-vanhollen-welch/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Reuters, “Israel stages airstrike across Gaza, makes arrests at hospital,” Nidal Al-Mughrabi and Maayan Lubell, February 17, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-stages-airstrikes-across-gaza-makes-arrests-hospital-2024-02-17/>.

<sup>6</sup> Reuters, “Fighting, fuel shortages knock out Gaza's second-largest hospital,” Nidal Al-Mughrabi and Ari Rabinovitch, February 18, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gazas-second-largest-hospital-completely-out-service-health-ministry-says-2024-02-18/>.

<sup>7</sup> Washington Post, “A Gaza doctor’s fear: Displacement, detention or death,” Miriam Berger, February 24, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/02/24/gaza-doctors-fear-displacement-detention-or-death/>.

It is critical that we address the medical crisis in Gaza immediately, as it exacerbates the “cascading disaster.”<sup>8</sup> While Israel does not allow journalists to independently access Gaza, Americans who have fled the area and medical personnel who have recently returned from Gaza have shared a dire perspective on the medical supplies and care available “even by the standards of war-ravaged regions.”<sup>9</sup> Medical staff are treating patients on the floor instead of beds and working ceaselessly for as long as two weeks, all while bombs and gunfire can be heard nearby and as “mass casualties” come in waves “at least three or four times a night.”<sup>10</sup> Healthcare Workers Watch reports that since October 7, over 400 medical staff have been killed in Gaza.<sup>11</sup> Yet, doctors continue to treat children with shrapnel and traumatic brain injuries that they have never seen before, with “[d]eath happening in fully treatable situation[s]” all around them.<sup>12</sup>

For many, conditions are appalling. One doctor was forced to “amputate[e] [his niece’s] leg at home” without anesthesia after she was hit by an Israeli tank.<sup>13</sup> One new mother – of the almost 200 a day in Gaza – had to give birth to her son “in the latrines closest to her tent” while another gave birth “in the streets amid rubble.”<sup>14</sup> Those who try to flee for safety face travel restrictions and are being forced to pay exorbitant fees to travel agencies and eventually Egyptian officials to get out of Gaza. This has included people injured by airstrikes who turn to crowdfunding to pay a fee as high as \$7,500 per person to get out and to the medical care they need.<sup>15</sup> For many medical relief workers, the challenge is to simply survive another day.

Not even the last remaining functioning hospitals have the medicines and supplies needed to be considered “fully operational,”<sup>16</sup> and no hospitals have the capacity to provide critical trauma

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<sup>8</sup> Washington Post, Opinion, “The U.S. should immediately mobilize ‘Operation Gaza Relief,’” Senators Jeff Merkley, Dick Durbin, Elizabeth Warren, Chris Van Hollen, and Peter Welch, February 16, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/02/16/israel-gaza-aid-senators-merkley-durbin-warren-vanhollen-welch/>.

<sup>9</sup> CBS News, 60 Minutes, “American doctor describes ‘incomparable’ devastation in Gaza impacting children as Israel-Hamas war continues,” Sharyn Alfonsi, February 25, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/american-doctor-on-gaza-devastation-from-israel-hamas-war-60-minutes-transcript/>; The Hill, “Gaza’s health care crisis is horrifying – and getting worse,” Joseph Choi and Sarakshi Rai, February 17, 2024, <https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/4473673-gazas-health-care-crisis-is-horrifying-and-getting-worse/>.

<sup>10</sup> CBS News, 60 Minutes, “American doctor describes ‘incomparable’ devastation in Gaza impacting children as Israel-Hamas war continues,” Sharyn Alfonsi, February 25, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/american-doctor-on-gaza-devastation-from-israel-hamas-war-60-minutes-transcript/>.

<sup>11</sup> Aljazeera, Opinion, “Healthcare in Gaza is in a state of acute trauma,” Osaid Alser, March 8, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/3/8/healthcare-in-gaza-is-in-a-state-of-acute-trauma>.

<sup>12</sup> CBS News, 60 Minutes, “American doctor describes ‘incomparable’ devastation in Gaza impacting children as Israel-Hamas war continues,” Sharyn Alfonsi, February 25, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/american-doctor-on-gaza-devastation-from-israel-hamas-war-60-minutes-transcript/>.

<sup>13</sup> Washington Post, “A kitchen table amputation without anesthetic in Gaza is one of many,” Heba Farouk Mahfouz and Loveday Morris, January 20, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/01/20/gaza-healthcare-crisis-amputation-anesthesia/>.

<sup>14</sup> ABC News, “The perils of giving birth in war-torn Gaza,” Zoe Magee and Ruwaida Amer, January 26, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/perils-giving-birth-war-torn-gaza/story?id=106699048>.

<sup>15</sup> The Intercept, “Desperate to Escape Gaza Carnage, Palestinians are Forced to Pay Exorbitant Fees to Enter Egypt,” Khalid Mohammed, March 7, 2024, <https://theintercept.com/2024/03/07/gaza-palestinians-border-crossing-egypt/>.

<sup>16</sup> The Hill, “Gaza’s health care crisis is horrifying – and getting worse,” Joseph Choi and Sarakshi Rai, February 17, 2024, <https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/4473673-gazas-health-care-crisis-is-horrifying-and-getting-worse/>.

care.<sup>17</sup> Sixteen of the 22 health centers operated by the United Nations are no longer in operation.<sup>18</sup> Lifesaving products such as “insulin and blood are in extreme shortage,” and with a lack of testing supplies infections go undiagnosed “allowing pathogens to spread more easily.”<sup>19</sup>

We condemn any use of hospital compounds by Hamas to plan or launch military action. We also note that field hospitals owned and operated by American partners have come under Israeli fire. In January, Israeli forces were accused of using an airstrike to target Jordan’s newest field hospital in Khan Younis.<sup>20</sup> This is the fourth allegation of a deliberate attack on Jordan’s field hospitals.<sup>21</sup>

The U.S. should urgently mobilize airlifts of medicine and medical equipment directly to the few remaining functional hospitals. The Biden administration should seek absolute assurances that the Israeli government will protect medical infrastructure and personnel. To address the medical crisis in Gaza, the administration should urgently consider sending the U.S. Navy’s two hospital ships, the USNS Mercy and the USNS Comfort, which would add 2,000 beds to the effort.<sup>22</sup> The administration should also work with our allies and partners to establish additional field hospitals to increase bed capacity and care.

With woefully inadequate aid getting in and the medical facilities and personnel that do exist under attack, a sea change is desperately needed. The U.S. must swiftly implement step one of Operation Gaza Relief. The U.S. has recently helped fund one field hospital in Rafah and there is room to expand on that progress.<sup>23</sup>

We would appreciate your responses to the following questions by April 17, 2024:

1. What capabilities does the U.S. government have to do the following, and does the Administration have the mechanisms in place to do so? If so, please describe such mechanisms.
  - a. Mobilize and support airlifts to provide hospitals in Gaza with supplies including basic medicines such as blood, antibiotics, and insulin;

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<sup>17</sup> New York Times, “Critical trauma care is not possible at any of Gaza’s hospitals, the W.H.O. says,” updated January 29, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2023/11/20/world/israel-hamas-gaza-war-news/who-gaza-hospitals>.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations Relief and Works Agency, “UNRWA at the Frontlines: Managing Health Care in Gaza During Catastrophe,” press release, Ghada Al-Jadba, Wafaa Zeidan, Paul B Spiegel, Tamer Shaer, Sana Najjar, and Akihiro Seita, 23 February 2024, <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/unrwa-frontlines-managing-health-care-gaza-during-catastrophe>.

<sup>19</sup> The Hill, “Gaza’s health care crisis is horrifying – and getting worse,” Joseph Choi and Sarakshi Rai, February 17, 2024, <https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/4473673-gazas-health-care-crisis-is-horrifying-and-getting-worse/>.

<sup>20</sup> NPR, “Jordan accuses Israel of deliberately targeting its Gaza field hospital,” Jane Arraf, January 19, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/19/1225623652/jordan-field-hospital-gaza-israel>.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Navy Hospital Ships Have History of Answering Nation's Call,” press release, André Sobocinski, March 27, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/story/Article/2128626/navy-hospital-ships-have-history-of-answering-nations-call/>.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development, “The United States Announces Additional Humanitarian Assistance for the Palestinian People,” press release, December 5, 2023, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/dec-05-2023-united-states-announces-additional-humanitarian-assistance-palestinian-people>; Brief on file with the Office of U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren.

- b. Deploy the Navy's hospital ships to the eastern Mediterranean;
  - c. Coordinate the transportation of Palestinians with severe injuries and illnesses to hospitals in the region;
  - d. Support the establishment of field hospitals in North Gaza and in Egypt across from the Rafah Crossing; and
  - e. Recommend and provide assistance to ensure no-fire zones for field hospitals.
2. If U.S. officials determine that any of the above will be implemented, what is the timeline for doing each?
3. Which U.S. government allies and partners are needed to achieve any of the above?
4. What access and capacity do American non-governmental organizations have to provide additional medical care, and have administration officials communicated with them about doing so?
5. What, if any, challenges is the field hospital funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development in Rafah currently facing?
6. Is the administration exploring options to expedite review to allow severely injured and sick Palestinians to access care in Egypt, including encouraging COGAT and Egypt to complete security reviews within 24 hours? Would this include allowing relatives to accompany the patient?
7. What other options are under consideration to address the ongoing medical care crisis in Gaza?

Israel has the right to pursue Hamas terrorists who carried out the horrific attacks on October 7<sup>th</sup>, but it must comply with international law. The combination of Israeli restrictions on access to humanitarian aid and the harm caused by relentless bombing and shelling has devastated Gaza's healthcare capacities at a time when the need for urgent care is soaring. It is critical that the United States leverage its unique capabilities to urgently and dramatically ramp up medical support to the people of Gaza.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



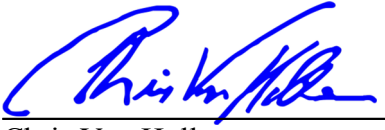
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Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator



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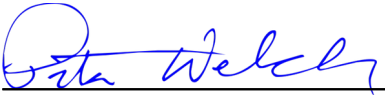
Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator



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