Press Release

# Gaza: The IRC warns return of Polio is a warning sign of widespread public health crisis

- Destruction of health infrastructure, attacks on hospitals and health workers and severe restrictions on the entrance of medical supplies, have devastated Gaza's health, water and sanitation infrastructure, driving the current public health crisis in Gaza
- Without access to clean water, it is only a matter of time before Polio is followed by other infectious diseases, which could sink Gaza even further into a health catastrophe.

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**Amman, Jordan, August 22, 2024 —** In July, Polio virus was detected in wastewater samples in Deir al-Baleh and Khan Younis. The first case, an unvaccinated ten-month old baby, was confirmed in August, meaning the virus is circulating in Gaza again after 25 years of being free from Polio. While the findings are alarming, they are entirely predictable, given consistent **warnings** from humanitarian organizations like the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and our partners, that a public health crisis is already well underway in Gaza. The overcrowded conditions in Gaza coupled with the widespread destruction of the health sector and facilities for clean water means that it's a matter of time before Polio spreads rapidly, along with other water-related infectious diseases, including Cholera.

ahead, however Israel's continued bombardment and the ongoing hostilities mean it's highly likely that this will be delayed and it has stressed the need for a ceasefire to enable the safe delivery of vaccines. Prior to the latest escalation, Polio had largely been eradicated from Gaza. WHO warned that children under five are most at risk of death or serious complications, due to having never been vaccinated.

**Dr. Jude Senkungu, IRC's Emergency Health Coordinator for the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), said,**

*"The news of Polio in Gaza should be an alarm bell that more infectious diseases are on the way. To prevent this public health crisis from leading to more preventable deaths, the vaccination campaign must be accompanied by a permanent and lasting ceasefire, and scaled up humanitarian aid into Gaza. This requires safe and unobstructed access into and within Gaza through all crossing points for vaccinations, associated equipment such as cold chain storage, and specialist staff.*

*"However, vaccinations will only be one part of the response. To prevent future outbreaks of disease, including cholera, there must be concurrent efforts to scale up access to safe, clean, treated water. Without clean water, it is nearly impossible to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, as people do not have enough to drink, leaving them with no other choice but to drink contaminated water. Not only that, they cannot utilise safe hand and personal hygiene practices or clean their living areas. This continues to promote the unsanitary conditions for diseases such as Polio and Cholera to spread, which could lead to more deaths from preventable diseases, particularly among children. Restrictions must be removed by Israel on the entry of materials such as water chlorination supplies, fuel to run water systems and equipment such as water pumps, solar panels and generator systems to help rebuild Gaza's water infrastructure, and provide clean water."*

**The IRC calls on the parties to protect civilians and the infrastructure they depend on for survival, including health and water infrastructure. From a humanitarian perspective, only an immediate and lasting ceasefire can fully protect civilians, release the hostages taken by Hamas and other armed**

**However, infectious diseases spread rapidly, and thousands of children do not have time to wait for a long, protracted negotiation process. An immediate cessation of hostilities across the whole of Gaza must be instituted to facilitate the vaccination campaign in August and September.**

*The IRC and partners in Gaza are providing emergency and life-saving medical care, including direct medical care, in Gaza's few remaining operational hospitals, as well as procuring and distributing medical supplies and pharmaceuticals. The IRC is also working with partners to deliver psychosocial support, cash assistance, and early childhood development programs in Gaza's many shelters. The IRC is providing water trucking and working to scale up its programming in water, sanitation and hygiene, nutrition and protection of women and children.*

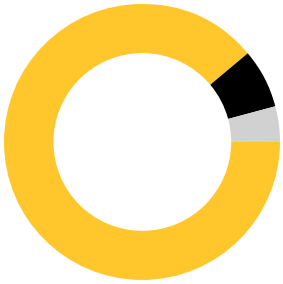
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The International Rescue Committee responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises, helping to restore health, safety, education, economic wellbeing, and power to people devastated by conflict and disaster. Founded in 1933 at the call of Albert Einstein, the IRC works in more than 40 countries and in 28 U.S. cities helping people to survive, reclaim control of their future, and strengthen their communities. Learn more at **www.rescue.org** and follow the IRC on **Instagram**, **Twitter**, **TikTok** and **Facebook**.

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