

Senator the Hon. Penny Wong
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Parliament House, Canberra
Via email

5 February 2025

Dear Minister Wong,

The Medical Association for Prevention of War thanks you for your letter of 17 January 2025 concerning the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

We are writing in response to issues raised in and by your letter, namely:

- Civilian protection
- The protection of healthcare in Gaza and the West Bank
- The proposed Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel
- Australia's relationship with Israel and opportunities for action

Civilian protection

We welcome your recognition of the gravity of the humanitarian situation and the principle of civilian protection that *should* prevent civilians from 'paying the price' of war.

It is well evident, however, that this principle has been thoroughly violated in Gaza: the civilian population has paid a terrible price over the course of the war, with children disproportionately affected. We note your statement that the Australian Government has condemned Israeli Defence Force attacks on civilians or aid workers and await details from your department about such statements of condemnation from you.

Protection of healthcare in Gaza and the West Bank

Over the past sixteen months Israel has relentlessly destroyed healthcare facilities, attacked and imprisoned healthcare workers, and blocked humanitarian aid from entering Gaza. Despite the very welcome ceasefire, Israel's attacks have now shifted to the West Bank, where access to hospitals, food, water and medical equipment is being increasingly blocked.

We wish to draw your attention to the work of Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHRI), who have a long history of advocating for the rights of the Palestinian people. Among its many activities, PHRI undertakes strenuous efforts for Palestinians detained in Israeli prisons, many of whom have been

[reported](#) to be subject to violence, torture, humiliation, abuse and medical neglect. PHRI has also for many years operated a mobile clinic in the West Bank, and recently been prevented by the Israeli authorities from continuing this work.

On 26 January, in collaboration with the Association for Civil Rights in Israel and the Hamoked: Center for the Defense of the Individual, PHRI appealed urgently to the Israeli Military and Civil Administrative authorities for a cessation of attacks on hospitals and clinics, and the restoration of regular supplies and safe access to them. Clear demands from the Australian government that Israel comply with this appeal would be valuable.

Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel

Your letter describes your efforts to create a global Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel. This could provide an additional means for highlighting the need to protect humanitarian care during wartime, and may contribute to further pressure on the Israeli government. However, we observe that such a declaration already exists in the Geneva Conventions, which have been ratified by practically every country in the world.

While any reaffirmation of the principles underlying humanitarian action would be welcome, it is imperative that it not delay or distract attention from effective measures to address specific areas of urgent need, such as the plight of the Palestinian people. Simply restating the law is insufficient; there must be an enforcement process that carries consequences for violators. That Australia is willing to take steps against violators of International Humanitarian Law is demonstrated by our sanctions against Russia for the war in Ukraine.

Australia's relationship with Israel and opportunities for action

MAPW urges, again, that Australia uses the leverage available to us for the protection of the people of Palestine, including the use of our diplomatic, defence and trade relationships with Israel. We note with increasing alarm, bordering on incredulity, that Australia still maintains a Trade and Defence Office in Jerusalem, 59 active permits for the export of lethal military equipment to Israel (including for parts for the highly lethal F35 fighter jets), and MOUs with Israel on defence industry cooperation and cyber security, to name just a very few elements of our bilateral relationship.

Cooperation of this kind is not consistent with the expressions of concern that you have stated in the context of the current war. For as long as this discrepancy in our approach remains, Australia's support for humanitarian relief for Palestinian civilians remains severely compromised.

We look forward to greatly strengthened actions from Australia for the protection of the Palestinian people.

Yours sincerely,

Sue Wareham

Dr Sue Wareham OAM
President, Medical Association for Prevention of War