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Severe physical and mental health impacts caused by widespread use of tear gas in Palestine refugee camps, according to University of California researchers

As the use of tear gas by Israeli Security Forces (ISF) in Aida camp in Bethlehem increases to an almost daily occurrence following Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital on 6 December 2017, University of California researchers report on the negative physical and mental health effects of chemical crowd control weapons on daily life among Palestine refugees. Their *No Safe Space: Health Consequences of Tear Gas Exposure Among Palestine Refugees* study is the first to analyze the effects of the use of tear gas in Aida and Dheisheh camps.

The study—conducted by **Dr. Rohini Haar** from the University of California, Berkeley's Human Rights Center and **Dr. Jess Ghannam** from the University of California, San Francisco—found widespread and indiscriminate use of tear gas in Aida camp.

"We found that the constant and unpredictable use of tear gas in Palestine refugee camps has a devastating effect on the mental and physical health of residents—especially the most vulnerable, including pregnant women, children, the elderly, and people already in ill health," said Haar, a research fellow at UC Berkeley's Human Rights Center and a doctor with Physicians for Human Rights.

Researchers conducted a randomized survey of 236 individuals in Aida camp as well as 10 focus groups in Aida and Dheisheh camps in August 2017 and found:

- **Exposure:** 100% of residents surveyed reported being exposed to tear gas in the past year; over the same period, 84.3% were exposed in the home, 9.4% at work, 10.7% in school, and 8.5% elsewhere, in a car for instance.
- **Physical health:** Respondents noted diverse symptoms from tear gas exposure, including loss of consciousness, miscarriage, breathing difficulties (including asthma), coughing, dizziness, rashes, severe pain, allergic dermatitis, headaches and neurological irritability, blunt trauma from canister injuries, and more.

- **Mental health:** ISF raids into the camps, which almost invariably involve the use of tear gas, resulted in very high levels of psychological distress, resulting in sleep disruption, acute stress responses, and chronic post-traumatic stress disorder.
- **Education and daily life:** The frequency and unpredictability of ISF raids, and ensuing use of tear gas are among the most distressing aspects for people living in the camps. Children and teachers reported being unable to carry out school activities during and after ISF attacks, since tear gas regularly enters school buildings and compounds. There are approximately 1,600 students in total enrolled at the two UNRWA schools in the camp.
- **Fear:** There is widespread fear of the long-term impacts of chemical exposure as well as fear that the tear gas currently being used is much more potent, long lasting, and dangerous than that used in previous years, and that it causes worse and longer lasting side effects.

The “No Safe Space” report recommendations include:

- The Israeli government should significantly reduce its use of tear gas against Palestinian civilians in the oPt.
- The Israeli government should ensure that its security forces comply with international guidelines on the use of force at all times when deploying tear gas and other crowd control weapons, including the the United Nations Code of Conduct and the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials. These require the Israel security forces to maintain and uphold the human rights of all persons in the performance of their duties, apply non-violent means before resorting to the use of force, and exercise restraint, only using force when it is absolutely necessary.
- Israel security forces should immediately stop using tear gas in ways that increase the risk of unwarranted injury and death, such as firing canisters directly at people, or using tear gas in confined spaces with limited escape routes. Chemical irritants should never be fired in residential areas, near schools or hospitals or near elderly people or others who may have difficulty escaping.
- The Israeli government should disclose information about the types of chemical irritants used in the West Bank, including their chemical composition, to medical professionals to enable proper treatment.
- Israeli Security Forces should respect international standards on medical ethics and patient privacy, including as laid forth in customary international human rights and humanitarian law.
- The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) needs further resources into order to be able to provide more structured protection against tear gas exposure and minimize its impacts on it staff and beneficiaries, as well as to fund further research into the health impacts of tear gas in West Bank camps.
- The international community, including other United Nations actors and state parties, should advocate on behalf of refugees to limit the sales of these weapons, increase transparency on the chemicals that are actually being used, and advocate for the discriminate, proportionate, and minimum viable use of all crowd control weapons.

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