

Urgent Appeal: Stop Preventable Newborn Deaths

Born into Crisis: The Struggle for Neonatal Care in the West Bank

The need for improved neonatal care in the West Bank has long been recognized, but the escalating humanitarian and protection crisis has made it even more critical. Military operations, settler violence, increased movement restrictions since October 7, 2023, and an overwhelmed healthcare system have created life-threatening barriers for newborns requiring urgent medical attention. Without immediate intervention, preventable deaths and long-term disabilities among premature and critically ill newborns will continue to rise.

An Urgent Call for Action

Juzoor for Health and Social Development and Al-Makassed Hospital, in full collaboration with the Neonatal Network in the West Bank, are launching a coordinated intervention to reduce the risks of preventable newborn deaths and disabilities. In line with the Ministry of Health's priorities and the *Every Newborn Action Plan* (ENAP), this initiative responds to the escalating neonatal health crisis. We urgently call on humanitarian organizations, health partners, and donors to support the establishment of a streamlined referral and emergency transport system, ensuring timely, safe, and reliable neonatal transfers. Without immediate action, newborns in critical condition face life-threatening delays and irreversible health consequences.

Fragile Lives Without Protection

Movement restrictions—already at an all-time high in September 2024, with 790 obstacles, including flying checkpoints, roadblocks, gates, and other barriers—have intensified even further following the fragile ceasefire in Gaza on January 19, 2025, severely impeding access to healthcare. Journeys that should take minutes now stretch into agonizing hours due to checkpoint closures, forced detours, prolonged delays, and, in some cases, outright denial of passage. At the same time, intensified settler violence and Israeli military incursions especially into northern West Bank refugee camps, and the frequent closure of village entrances have transformed entire communities into isolated enclaves, cutting them off from critical care. Attacks on healthcare have further undermined access to essential services, with the World Health Organization documenting 694 assaults on health facilities, ambulances, and medical staff since October 2023. Given this escalating crisis, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reports that the risk of preventable complications, stillbirths, and maternal deaths is rising, with many women forced to give birth at home or en route. Premature infants requiring incubators and newborns suffering from birth complications face increasing

barriers to urgent medical care, as ambulances encounter systematic delays, medical teams are obstructed, and critical interventions remain out of reach. With hospitals in the West Bank operating at only 70% capacity, and Israeli-issued permits for accessing specialized medical care in East Jerusalem

becoming increasingly difficult to obtain newborns with critical medical needs face growing risks of preventable deaths and disabilities.

Neonatal Emergency Cases Highlighting the Crisis

Twin Infants Denied Transfer

- Born prematurely at 31 weeks in Alia Hospital, Hebron, Samar Odeh's twin infants, each weighing under 1500 grams, required urgent transfer to Al-Makassed Hospital in East Jerusalem for specialized care.
- Despite prior coordination, Israeli soldiers blocked their passage at the Tunnel checkpoint, forcing them to return to Hebron.
- One twin deteriorated en route and was repeatedly denied transfer. Eventually, they were admitted to Al-Mizan Hospital, with one in critical condition, on a ventilator and cardiac stimulants.

Triplets Transferred in Critical Condition

- Mona Ibrahim's triplets, born at 26 weeks, required immediate intensive care.
- Their transport to Al-Makassed Hospital on January 26, 2025, was delayed by 45 minutes due to checkpoint restrictions, despite prior coordination.
- Upon arrival, their body temperatures were dangerously low (<35°C).
- The two infants, weighing 550g and 720g, died within 24 hours. The surviving triplet, weighing 850g, remains on a ventilator, suffering from severe complications and brain hemorrhaging.

**Names changed to protect privacy.*

Neonatal Care & Transport

The urgency of ensuring timely access to lifesaving care for neonates has never been greater. Premature infants, those requiring ventilatory support or incubators, and newborns experiencing complications such as asphyxia or congenital anomalies are among the most vulnerable. The *National Neonatal Referral Protocol (2021)* emphasizes that survival rates improve significantly with timely and well-equipped neonatal transport. Hypothermia upon arrival is a critical risk factor, reducing survival rates and increasing complications, making temperature-controlled transport essential. Establishing an emergency transport system equipped with ventilators and incubators, and staffed by a trained neonatal transport team, is crucial for the safe transfer of critically ill newborns to specialized care. This includes referrals from lower-level health facilities (Levels 1 and 2) to advanced tertiary care centers (Level 3), such as Al-Makassed Hospital in East Jerusalem, which houses the most specialized neonatal facility available.

What we are proposing:

1. **Establishment of a Specialized Neonatal Transport Unit:**
 - Procure and equip transport vehicles with neonatal ventilators, incubators, and monitoring systems.
2. **Integration with Juzoor's Helpline:**
 - Develop a coordination mechanism between the transport unit and Juzoor's helpline to facilitate urgent referrals.
 - Implement a tracking system to monitor transport requests and improve response efficiency.

3. Development of Operational Guidelines:

- Formulate comprehensive protocols and standard operating procedures (SOP) for the operation of the neonatal transport unit, including response time, medical stabilization, and handover procedures.

4. Training and Capacity Building:

- Conduct specialized training programs for transport unit staff, including paramedics, neonatologists, and nurses.

5. Orientation and Stakeholder Engagement:

- Organize an orientation program for the 34 neonatal units in the West Bank to introduce the neonatal transport system.
- Engage ENAP stakeholders, government officials, hospital administrators, and neonatal specialists, to reinforce collaboration and commitment.

Who We Are:

Juzoor for Health and Social Development is a leading Palestinian non-governmental organization (NGO), dedicated to improving the health and well-being of Palestinian families and advocating for health as a fundamental human right. Since its establishment in 1996, Juzoor has been instrumental in community development, capacity building, policy advocacy, and emergency medical response, working closely with national and international health bodies. As part of its commitment to maternal and child health, Juzoor has played a key role in strengthening neonatal care systems.

Al-Makassed Hospital is one of the main referral hospitals for the Palestinian community of Jerusalem, West Bank, and Gaza Strip providing a range of specialties. Its Neonatal Unit is the largest and most advanced neonatal care facility in the region, offering Level 3 neonatal intensive care services. The hospital's expert neonatologists, pediatric specialists, and critical care nurses have extensive experience in managing neonatal referrals and emergency cases, making it a vital partner in this initiative.