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## **AUB conference on Palestinian health: Donors and policy-makers' interventions should aim to improve health and ensure justice**

Beirut, Lebanon- 22/03/2012 -Exposure to injustice and violence should be factored into any health policy being devised for Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, or neighboring countries, concluded researchers and health experts who recently met at the American University of Beirut.

“Those providing services to Palestinian refugees must address the issue of human insecurity and distress by exposing the fundamental structural and root causes of these problems and going beyond the delivery of basic needs towards calling for justice to Palestinians,” was one of the main policy recommendations which emerged from intensive discussions following the conclusion of an international conference on Palestinian health inside and outside the occupied territories, held earlier this month. Jointly organized by the Center for Research on Population and Health at the Faculty of Health Sciences, AUB and the Institute of Community and Public Health at Birzeit University, the conference was held in collaboration with the Lancet Palestinian Health Alliance, a network of Palestinian, regional and international researchers, committed to the highest scientific standards in research on Palestinians. This was the third conference of the Lancet Palestinian Health Alliance, the first two were held at the Institute of Community and Public Health - Birzeit University. The Welfare Association and Medical Aid for Palestinians funded the conference.

Over 150 participants attended the two-day conference, coming from Gaza and the West Bank, from Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and Syria, and from Canada, Europe, Japan and the US. More than 50 presentations during the conference exposed Palestinian refugees' broader health concerns and the dire living conditions in which they live both inside and outside the occupied territories.

The policy recommendations were based on research findings made by various groups working on humanitarian and development objectives and presented during the conference.

For instance, a recent study conducted by Médecins Sans Frontières among refugees in Burj el-Barajneh, a Beirut suburb, found that 51 percent of adults suffered from mental distress or disorder. Another study by AUB in collaboration with UNRWA assessing the health and living conditions of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon found that 31 percent of those surveyed suffer from chronic illnesses, 25 percent suffer from acute illnesses and 40 percent of households are overcrowded.

In Palestine, around 800,000 Palestinians have been imprisoned on political grounds. A recent study completed by the Institute of Community and Public Health in collaboration with the Women's Studies Institute at Birzeit University documents that this has adverse effects on the livelihoods, functioning and wellbeing of Palestinian political prisoner families from financial hardship to distress and psychosocial health problems among wives and children. Another study by the World Health Organization (WHO) shows that the Israeli military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank hinders the access of patients to health care: In Gaza in 2010, 646 referral patients were denied permits, and 1418 missed their hospital appointment due to delays – of these 421 were called for interrogation and six died waiting for permits. And what of the complex relationship between aid and occupation? Or the idea that aid can actually be unhealthy if what it does is sustain the occupation? In fact, the occupied Palestinian territory has received more developmental assistance for health per capita since 1990 than any country in the Arab world yet the development of Palestinian health institutions has not progressed.

Dr. Richard Horton, editor of the *Lancet*, the leading international medical and health journal in the world, attended the conference and delivered the opening presentation on “Science and social justice: purpose and prospects” contextualizing Palestinian health in both its scientific and social justice formulations.

A policy session, moderated by Dr. Ala Alwan, regional director of WHO-EMRO, concluded the conference. Policy recommendations were discussed by five prominent speakers concerned with health of Palestinians representing the Lebanon Ministry of Public Health, the Welfare Association, the Issam Fares Institute of Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, United Nations Refugee and Works Agency (UNRWA), and Medical Aid for Palestinians. They were divided into four main areas: health and living conditions of Palestinians; mental health and well being of Palestinians; donors; and access to health services and risk protection.

Conference participants also recommended that donor funding should be directed where there is greatest public health need (as determined by disease burden and accessibility of health services), in effort to create greater equity within the occupied territories. Moreover, researchers and policymakers need to invest in the development of metrics and research relevant to context and culture. Contextual and cultural information is relevant not only to defining needs of people, but also in guiding interventions based on solutions people identify with.

Policy makers should ensure that Palestinian patients in the occupied territories are not discriminated against in access to Palestinian health facilities, including secondary and tertiary care in East Jerusalem, concluded participants.

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**Note to Editors**

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Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 600 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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