

24th October 2024

Dear Nicola Ranger,

We are writing on behalf of a group of nurses and Royal College of Nursing (RCN) members all of whom have come together in solidarity with Palestinian healthcare workers. We are supported by over 3000 people, members and non-members alike, who have signed [our petition](#) calling on the RCN to take action to protect healthcare workers and patients in Palestine. We are horrified by the ongoing assaults on Gaza and Lebanon by Israel, which have injured and killed unprecedented numbers of healthcare workers and civilians, and damaged healthcare systems. In October 2024, the UN marked 42,718 Palestinian deaths – most of the dead being women and children¹. The UN has also confirmed 500 healthcare workers have been killed in Palestine since 7 October 2023, with the OHCHR stating that “These killings have occurred against the backdrop of systematic attacks on hospitals and other medical facilities in violation of the laws of war”². Since the escalation of hostilities between Israel and Lebanon on 17 September 2024, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has verified 23 attacks on healthcare infrastructure in Lebanon, leading to 72 deaths and 43 injuries among health workers and patients. Fifteen incidents impacted health facilities, while 13 impacted health transport.³

A recent report issued by the (United Nations) UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem states that “Israel has perpetrated a concerted policy to destroy Gaza’s healthcare system as part of a broader assault on Gaza, committing war crimes and the crime against humanity of extermination with relentless and deliberate attacks on medical personnel and facilities”⁴. Navi Pillay, Chair of the Commission declared that “Israel must immediately stop its unprecedented wanton destruction of healthcare facilities in Gaza. By targeting healthcare facilities, Israel is targeting the right to health itself with significant long-term detrimental effects on the civilian population. Children in

¹ OCHA (2024) *Reported impact snapshot: Gaza Strip (22 October 2024)*, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - occupied Palestinian territory. Available at: <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/reported-impact-snapshot-gaza-strip-22-october-2024> (Accessed: 22 October 2024).

² UN (2024) *Statement on the killing and arbitrary detention of health workers in Gaza - OHCHR - Question of Palestine*, United Nations. Available at: <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/statement-gaza-ohchr-25jun24/> (Accessed: 16 October 2024).

³ WHO (2024) *Attacks on hospitals and health workers jeopardize provision of health in Lebanon*, World Health Organization. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news/item/16-10-2024-attacks-on-hospitals-and-health-workers-jeopardize-provision-of-health-in-lebanon> (Accessed: 23 October 2024).

⁴ UN (2024) *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel: Note by the Secretary-General*. Available at: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/262/79/pdf/n2426279.pdf> (Accessed: 23 October 2024)

particular have borne the brunt of these attacks, suffering both directly and indirectly from the collapse of the health system.”⁵

As nurses, we are expected to adhere to ethical and professional standards, and we feel an urgency to use our collective power to act in solidarity with the thousands of civilians and healthcare workers who have been affected and will likely continue to be unless Israel is held accountable. We ask the RCN to echo the demands made by the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory in demanding Israel “immediately cease targeting medical facilities, staff and vehicles, halt the arbitrary and unlawful detention of Palestinians, including children, and end torture and other ill-treatment of all those who have been arrested or detained”.⁶

Ours aims are the following:

- 1. For the RCN to issue a statement in solidarity with healthcare workers in Palestine, condemning Israel's deliberate attacks on hospitals and other healthcare facilities.**

Since October 2023, the RCN has released three statements, calling for an end to the conflict and rightfully condemning attacks on health workers, patients and civilians, the last statement having been released in February 2024. In July 2023, then RCN General Secretary Pat Cullen stated that “to remain silent in the face of harm and injustice would be ... a dereliction of our duty as nursing professionals”⁷. In June 2022 the RCN released a statement in support of nurses and healthcare workers in Ukraine, accompanying it with a donation of £100,000 to the WHO for use in supporting healthcare systems and healthcare workers in Ukraine⁸. Pat Cullen was quoted as saying words to the effect that we stand with our nursing colleagues in Ukraine because of our “shared values”. To date, no such statement or gesture has been forthcoming from RCN council with regard to Palestine or Lebanon where health workers have been

⁵ UN (2024d) *Un Commission finds war crimes and crimes against ...*, United Nations Human Rights Office for the High Commissioner. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/10/un-commission-finds-war-crimes-and-crimes-against-humanity-israeli-attacks> (Accessed: 23 October 2024).

⁶ UN (2024d) *Un Commission finds war crimes and crimes against ...*, United Nations Human Rights Office for the High Commissioner. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/10/un-commission-finds-war-crimes-and-crimes-against-humanity-israeli-attacks> (Accessed: 23 October 2024).

⁷ RCN (2023) *Nursing speaks out: Royal College of Nursing, The Royal College of Nursing*. Available at: <https://www.rcn.org.uk/news-and-events/Blogs/nursing-speaks-out-280723> (Accessed: 22 October 2024).

⁸ McKay, J. (2022a) *RCN donates ‘fees of 500 members’ to support Ukraine*, NursingNotes. Available at: https://nursingnotes.co.uk/news/clinical/rcn-donates-fees-of-500-members-to-support-ukraine/#google_vignette (Accessed: 22 October 2024).

systematically targeted, killed and detained⁹. Does this betray the structural racism that the RCN has declared it wants to stand against?

In addition, calls from the RCN, International Council of Nurses (ICN) and others for the protection of health workers, civilians, children and other protected groups have gone unheeded by the Israeli regime and armed forces, and human rights violations have been effectively ignored by our government. It is therefore imperative to escalate the urgency of these demands through releasing further statements to call on the government to take action in preventing further destruction and death.

Several of our members have reported attempts to contact the RCN to request for such a statement to be issued with no response. This was also discussed at Congress 2024 as part of an emergency motion, with promises made of an impending statement which is yet to be released¹⁰. We have, therefore, taken the liberty of drafting a statement that is grounded in international humanitarian law, the RCN's statement on Human Rights, the RCN's Humanitarian Framework and the findings of both the WHO and UN bodies that embodies our horror and commitment to stand for justice as both healthcare workers and people of conscience. Please see the statement attached [here](#).

- 2. For the RCN to join with an existing coalition such as the Free Palestine Coalition, which includes Healthcare workers for Palestine, Black Jewish Alliance, BLM UK, Disabled People Against Cuts and echo the demands of Oxfam and Amnesty International demanding that the government adheres fully to its own guidelines, whereby they “will not issue export licenses if the items might be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of International Humanitarian Law”¹¹.**

Oxfam have stated that “In the light of the International Court of Justice ruling, they believe that Israel has undertaken, and is undertaking, specific actions that risk genocide and this is being done using arms supplied by the UK Government.”¹² In September 2024, Foreign Secretary,

⁹ UN (2024) *Statement on the killing and arbitrary detention of health workers in Gaza - OHCHR - Question of Palestine, United Nations*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/statement-gaza-ohchr-25jun24/> (Accessed: 16 October 2024).

¹⁰ The Nursing Times (2024) *RCN Urged to Strengthen Stance on Humanitarian Crises*. Available at: [https://www.nursingtimes.net/global-nursing/rcn-urged-to-strengthen-stance-on-humanitarian-crises-04-06-2024/#:~:text=The%20%E2%80%9Chorrific%E2%80%9D%20reality%20for%20nurses,Nursing%20\(RCN\)%20Congress%202024.](https://www.nursingtimes.net/global-nursing/rcn-urged-to-strengthen-stance-on-humanitarian-crises-04-06-2024/#:~:text=The%20%E2%80%9Chorrific%E2%80%9D%20reality%20for%20nurses,Nursing%20(RCN)%20Congress%202024.) (Accessed: 23 October 2024)

¹¹ FCDO (2024) *UK suspends around 30 arms export licences to Israel for use in Gaza over International Humanitarian Law Concerns*, GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-suspends-around-30-arms-export-licences-to-israel-for-use-in-gaza-over-international-humanitarian-law-concerns#:~:text=The%20UK's%20robust%20export%20licensing,violations%20of%20International%20Humanitarian%20Law.> (Accessed: 22 October 2024).

¹² Oxfam (no date) *Does the UK sell arms to Israel?*, Oxfam GB. Available at: <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-oxfam/gaza-israel-crisis-sign-petition-call-for-ceasefire-now/does-the-uk-sell-arms-to-israel/> (Accessed: 22 October 2024).

David Lammy stated “Criterion 2C of the Strategic Export Licensing Criteria states that the government will “not issue export licenses if there is a clear risk that the items might be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian law”¹³.

In January 2024, the International Court of Justice “found it plausible that Israel’s acts could amount to genocide and issued six provisional measures”.¹⁴ As stated in the RCN’s human rights and nursing position - “The RCN has an important role to play, along with its international alliances, in bringing attention to human rights abuses affecting patients and nursing staff, thereby encouraging practical action”¹⁵. We therefore call on the RCN to urge the UK government, as a signatory to the Genocide Convention, to adhere to the ICJs ruling, aligning with the RCN’s stated position on the importance of upholding human rights. “In light of the urgency of the situation and the real risk of irreparable harm to the people in Gaza, the experts also urged states parties to the Genocide Convention to abide by their obligations to prevent genocide, taking all measures in their power to ensure implementation of the ICJ’s provisional measures. The experts also stressed the critical role that civil society plays to give effect to this ruling”¹⁶.

The RCN’s “Humanitarian Framework”, approved by RCN Council 27 September 2022 states that the RCN shall “undertake equitable and cross-party political lobbying within the UK and support global nursing by seizing opportunities to engage in informing and influencing domestic and international decision-makers when considering humanitarian aid for nursing”¹⁷. We remind the RCN of its declaration in the Humanitarian Framework that “the RCN has an important role to play, along with its international alliances, in bringing attention to human rights abuses affecting patients and nursing staff, thereby encouraging practical action”.

¹³ FCDO (2024a) *UK policy on Arms Export Licences to Israel: Foreign secretary’s statement*, GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-statement-on-uk-policy-on-arms-export-licences-to-israel> (Accessed: 22 October 2024).

¹⁴ UN (2024a) *Gaza: ICJ ruling offers hope for protection of civilians enduring apocalyptic conditions, say UN Experts* | OHCHR, United Nations Human Rights Office for the High Commissioner. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/01/gaza-icj-ruling-offers-hope-protection-civilians-enduring-apocalyptic> (Accessed: 22 October 2024).

¹⁵ RCN (2012) *Human rights and nursing: Royal College of Nursing, The Royal College of Nursing*. Available at: <https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/pub-004249> (Accessed: 16 October 2024).

¹⁶ UN (2024a) *Gaza: ICJ ruling offers hope for protection of civilians enduring apocalyptic conditions, say UN Experts* | OHCHR, United Nations Human Rights Office for the High Commissioner. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/01/gaza-icj-ruling-offers-hope-protection-civilians-enduring-apocalyptic> (Accessed: 22 October 2024).

¹⁷ RCN (2022) *Humanitarian Crises Framework*. Available at: <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.rcn.org.uk/-/media/Royal-College-Of-Nursing/Documents/About-Us/RCN-Humanitarian-Crises-Framework.pdf&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1729679000197680&usg=AOvVaw2-oXYsBzdiOnn3fhIhPOK> (Accessed 23 October 2024)

We therefore ask that, in accordance to the Humanitarian Framework, point 7.5, that the RCN works with its members to:

- Draft letters for RCN members to send to elected officials
- Place agreed upon questions within UK Parliament and devolved administrations
- Participate in UK Parliament All-Party Parliamentary Groups

3. For the RCN to disclose, with full transparency, the “look through holdings” of their current investment portfolio in order to reassure its members that the RCN is adhering in full to its Statement of Investment Principles and as per RCN’s Ethical exclusions as stipulated on Page 5 & 6¹⁸, including but not limited to:

- **Cluster bombs and landmines – Prohibited under international treaties and not included in any portfolio managed by Sarasin**
- **Armaments – zero exposure to manufacturers of whole weapon systems and 10% of revenues from sales connected to weapons systems including components, support systems and services designed for weapon use**
- **Civilian firearms – proposed restriction: zero exposure to either the manufacture or sale of civilian firearms**

Furthermore, the RCN’s policy states that “in addition to the specific exclusionary criteria, the investment manager is expected to avoid companies which are materially invested in ethically unacceptable practices: Companies which persistently, knowingly and materially breach international legal standards”¹⁹. Therefore, acting in accordance with this policy would render any RCN investments in Israel’s Occupied Territories as in breach of RCN’s code of ethics. The Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) of 19 July 2024 concluded that Israel’s continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) is unlawful. Israel is now under legal obligation to end its unlawful presence, cease immediately all new settlement activities, evacuate all settlers and make reparation for the damage caused. The Court also found that all states are under obligation not to recognize the situation arising from the unlawful presence of Israel in the OPT as legal and not to render aid or assistance in maintaining the circumstances created by Israel’s continued presence in the OPT.²⁰

¹⁸ RCN (2024) *RCN governance documents: Royal College of Nursing, The Royal College of Nursing*. Available at: <https://www.rcn.org.uk/About-us/How-the-RCN-is-governed/Our-governance-documents> (Accessed: 22 October 2024).

¹⁹ RCN (2024) *RCN governance documents: Royal College of Nursing, The Royal College of Nursing*. Available at: <https://www.rcn.org.uk/About-us/How-the-RCN-is-governed/Our-governance-documents> (Accessed: 22 October 2024).

²⁰ ICJ (2024) *Summary of the advisory opinion of 19 July 2024, Summary of the Advisory Opinion of 19 July 2024 | INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE*. Available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/204176> (Accessed: 22 October 2024).

A formal request was made for the RCN to disclose their investment at both Congress and the AGM this year. Their investments were subsequently published alongside a reiteration of the above statement of investment principles. However, the information shared is not adequate and we are formally requesting further information and full investment transparency, including the look through holdings of the RCN's current investment portfolio.

4. For organised RCN representation at various planned demonstrations and marches and to explore action the RCN can take to ensure demands are met.

We have made several attempts to contact the RCN activism academy for support in this area but have not, as yet, had any response. We would like to address the inaccessibility of the activism academy, where there are no contact details for support clearly stipulated on the RCN website and roles among leadership are unclear.

We suggest the following actions:

- Public and clear support from the RCN for members attending marches and demonstrations.
- We suggest the RCN produces resources (eg. protest materials, union merchandise) and publicly supports RCN members attending demonstrations and marches.
- We demand the RCN explores and supports any action (eg. divestment, industrial action) that may be required to meet demands. This is particularly pertinent in the context of weapons manufacturing that occurs in the United Kingdom.
- The RCN makes contact with other trade unions who are taking action and utilise opportunities for collective power.

5. For the RCN to make a donation in support of Palestinian medical and emergency aid equivalent to that made in support of Ukraine.

In June 2022 the RCN made a donation equivalent to the “fees of 500 members” to support emergency efforts in Ukraine and £100,000 was donated to the WHO to be used to support healthcare and healthcare workers in Ukraine.²¹ We therefore request that the RCN makes an equivalent donation, once again to the WHO, to support healthcare infrastructure and workers in both Palestine and Lebanon.

As with Ukraine, the donation will support those displaced in both Palestine and Lebanon who need “access to health care, whether in response to the war, to prevent disease outbreaks, or care in situations such as childbirth”²².

²¹ McKay, J. (2022a) RCN donates ‘fees of 500 members’ to support Ukraine, NursingNotes.

Available at:

https://nursingnotes.co.uk/news/clinical/rcn-donates-fees-of-500-members-to-support-ukraine/#google_vignette (Accessed: 22 October 2024).

²² McKay, J. (2022a) RCN donates ‘fees of 500 members’ to support Ukraine, NursingNotes.

Available at:

https://nursingnotes.co.uk/news/clinical/rcn-donates-fees-of-500-members-to-support-ukraine/#google_vignette (Accessed: 22 October 2024).

6. Responding to global humanitarian crises

The RCN's "Humanitarian Framework", approved by RCN Council 27 September 2022, aims to "provide the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and its members with guidance to inform determinations and decision making regarding appropriate, ethical and timely response to global humanitarian crises" and that "Any response from the RCN will be grounded in the principles set out in relevant national legislation and international conventions regarding human rights".

Additionally, at Congress 2024, an action was set to create and implement an RCN humanitarian crises policy alongside this framework to ensure equity in responses to global conflict and catastrophe. Members have not been updated on the progress of this, and additionally have not been consulted on the design of this despite numerous attempts to support the design of this policy.

In lieu of the completed policy, we therefore request the RCN actions an immediate plan for RCN members - as stipulated in the RCN's Humanitarian Crisis Framework - to:

- "Support to in-country nursing associations"
- "Fund and facilitate through bona fide aid organisations, the provision of direct humanitarian aid to global nursing and health service colleagues e.g., medical equipment, supplies"
- "Identify and offer aid, guidance and support to RCN member diaspora"
- "Identify RCN members, including within the diaspora, who, if the RCN is approached by a humanitarian aid provider, may be willing to support or directly engage in delivering humanitarian aid"
- "Support RCN members who are engaging in humanitarian aid work"
- "Identify and support nurses, nursing support workers and health workers' seeking refuge / fleeing crisis areas"

Furthermore, the RCN has pledged that, "when a humanitarian crisis occurs and humanitarian aid is needed, the RCN as a trade union and professional body representing diverse caring members, who recognise the critical role nursing plays in health and care system safety, will rapidly consider what aid, assistance or support they should or could offer."

Given the RCN's stated position being founded on their support for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) and the Geneva Conventions of 1949 (UN 1949, 1977, 1978)²³, we expect that all our aims are in keeping with those of the RCN. In addition to this, our petition, which now has over 3000 signatures, shows widespread support for our aims above.

²³ RCN (2012) *Human rights and nursing: Royal College of Nursing, The Royal College of Nursing*. Available at: <https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/pub-004249> (Accessed: 16 October 2024).

We are very motivated to work alongside the RCN to ensure these aims are achieved. We are aware that several emergency motions were submitted at congress on this topic asking for the RCN to take further action. Unfortunately, no motions specific to the current genocide in Gaza were accepted. During the debate several members discussed and shared their concerns over the current genocide in Gaza indicating their widespread support for the RCN to take action on this matter. It was evident that delegates in Congress were supportive of an improved RCN humanitarian response. We have made several attempts to liaise with the RCN and the International Nursing Committee (whom we understand has been selected to work on this motion), through our council members, through the AGM and directly with specific members. However, we have not had any responses or updates to these attempts.

As RCN members, we hold a collective power and responsibility to stand up for what is right and in accordance with international law. We are an international community, and we must stand with our colleagues overseas in areas of conflict and crisis. We urge the RCN to consider these demands and therefore request a formal response to these demands. We are more than happy to partake in further discussion with RCN leadership surrounding how we might be able to work together towards our shared goals.

Best wishes,

Nurses for Palestine,
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