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Joint submission of the World Federation of the Deaf and the Palestinian Union for the Deaf to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee) at its 33rd session on the Situation of Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory

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Submitted by: The World Federation of the Deaf and the Palestinian Union for Deaf

UNCRPD Articles of focus:

Article 11: Situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies

Article 15: Freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment

Article 16: Protection from all forms of exploitation, violence, and abuse.

Article 9: Accessibility to the physical environment, transport, and information.

Article 21: Freedom of expression and access to information through accessible formats, including sign language.

Introduction

- A. The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is honoured to submit its inputs, alongside the Palestinian Union of the Deaf, to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee) at its 33rd session.

- B. The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international non-governmental organisation representing and promoting the human rights of approximately 70 million deaf people worldwide. The WFD is a federation of deaf organisations from 138 nations; its mission is to promote the human rights of deaf people and ensure full, quality, and equal access to all spheres of life, including self-determination, sign language, education, employment, and community life. WFD holds consultative status with the United Nations and is a founding member of the International Disability Alliance (IDA). WFD's Action Plan for the period 2023-2027 and Strategic Direction 2023-2033 has a Vision that is *"A World Where Deaf People Everywhere Can Sign Anywhere"*, and its Mission is *"We work towards the full realisation of linguistic rights and human rights in all areas of life, with full recognition and implementation of these rights across local, national and international levels"*.



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We promote the human rights of deaf people in accordance with the principles and objectives outlined in the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and other relevant Human Rights Treaties. As the representative body, the WFD strives to ensure that deaf people across the world are equipped with the knowledge, tools, and strategies to advocate for, achieve, and defend their rights.

We believe that human rights are universal, applicable to all individuals, regardless of age, disability, linguistic background, race, or geographical location. WFD collaborates with member National Associations of the Deaf (NADs) worldwide, where we have a presence in advocating for the rights of deaf people, including their rights in situations of emergency, such as those occasioned by conflict and political oppression, as seen in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

- C. The Palestinian Union for Deaf; As the national representative organisation of deaf people in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (oPt) who is a Member of the WFD.
- D. The present joint submission is to respond to the request of the CRPD Committee at their 33rd Session about persons with disabilities affected by conflict in Gaza and the West Bank.

Guided by our mandate to uphold the dignity, rights, and inclusion of deaf people as provided for by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, this submission exposes the systemic and disproportionate impact of the Israeli occupation and military actions on deaf Palestinians in Gaza. It further highlights the structural absence of protective frameworks, both domestically and internationally, which continue to leave deaf individuals without a voice, visibility, or viable access to their most basic rights.

This report is informed by direct consultative engagements with deaf people from Gaza and a literature review of reports conducted collectively by the World Federation of the Deaf and the Palestinian Union for the Deaf.

Legal frameworks

Despite the ratification of the UNCRPD, upon which various national and international legislations are anchored in protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, deaf people in Gaza and the West Bank remain unprotected in practice due to language barriers, institutional exclusion, and the absence of deaf-inclusive strategies in humanitarian response.

In compliance with the UNCRPD, the State of Israel must uphold the following key articles that have been violated through its occupation of Palestine:

Article 11: Situations of Risk and Humanitarian Emergencies: Obligates States to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including armed conflict. Deaf people in the Occupied Palestinian Territory are at the risk of repression, collective punishment, and institutionalised discrimination, with frequent attacks and evictions. There are documented



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Testimonies and evidence that the Israeli army has killed deaf people, deaf children and their families in the occupied territory.¹

Article 15: Freedom of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment: This article emphasizes that no person with disabilities should be subjected to torture or cruel treatment; yet deaf people on an every day basis since October 2023 are subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment by the armies of the State of Israel which occupies and conducts operations continuously.²

Article 16: Protection from all forms of exploitation, violence, and abuse: This article ensures that deaf people are protected from all forms of harm and mistreatment. It emphasises that Governments must take appropriate and effective measures to safeguard deaf individuals from all forms of exploitation, violence, and abuse.³

Article 9: Accessibility to the physical environment, transport, and information: During the ongoing attacks in Gaza and in the West Bank, information on evictions, availability of aid and planned bombings in accessible formats is not provided to all persons with disabilities, including through visual means such as national sign language. These amount to communication and language barriers that prevent deaf people from accessing early warning information and communication rights that this article entitles them to.

Article 21: Freedom of expression and access to information through accessible formats, including sign language: Whereas this article emphasises the need for accessible formats of information, including during emergencies, this is totally lacking in the current occupation by the State of Israel.

The Impact of Israeli Policies on the Deaf Community-Article 11

The State of Israel ratified the CRPD in September 2012. As a State Party, it is obligated to actively promote the human rights of people with disabilities in all spheres of life and monitor the implementation of the Convention's principles throughout the country.

However, the Israeli occupation of Palestine has long subjected Palestinians to repression, collective punishment, and institutionalised discrimination, a violation of Article 11. Furthermore, deaf individuals face a compounded form of violence, exploitation, exclusion, and harm both as persons with disabilities and as members of a linguistic and cultural minority.

¹ Anji Malak on deaf and hard of hearing people in Gaza: "There are some friends who were killed in cold blood because they were in a place that was targeted and shelled. They could not hear the sounds. They could not hear the missiles. Israel is exercising violence in cold blood without any feelings towards these people." In: Bearing Witness: Palestinians with disabilities in Gaza & all occupied Palestine webinar, 10/06/2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ui9uBJyuaLc&t=1284s>.

² For example, Ihab Tanboura, a deaf man from Beit Lahia, has been held by the Israeli Occupation army since October 2023, with no information on his condition.²⁰ Israeli Occupation soldiers filmed themselves torturing and abusing him as Ihab lay shirtless and bruised on the ground whilst a booted soldier stepped on his head. See: Ryan Al-Natour: [What is mean to be deaf and Palestinian in Gaza](#). 19 June 2024.

³ The New Arab, Gaza mourns deaf activist Hashem Ghazal killed with his wife in Israeli strike, 14 May 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/gaza-mourns-deaf-activist-hashem-ghazal-killed-israel>.



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KEY CONCERNS AND EVIDENCE FROM THE CONSULTATIONS WITH DEAF PEOPLE

• Mass killings and forced displacement in Gaza: Article 11, 15 and 16

During the conflict in Gaza (October 2023 – February 2024), at least 170 deaf individuals have been killed so far, among them children, women, teachers, and community leaders. This figure is compiled from civil society sources. It includes entire families who were unable to receive or comprehend evacuation orders due to the lack of early warning systems adapted for deaf communities in their national sign language. Airstrikes are conducted without any visual alert mechanisms, whereas deaf people do not hear, hence are unable to run or hide when the strikes are executed. The lack of accessible alerts exacerbates the risk of attack, depriving deaf people of the right to protection and timely access to shelter for safety. Schools such as Al-Amal School for the Deaf were bombed and destroyed, depriving over 200 students of their only accessible education space.

Entire neighbourhoods have been erased with no regard to the unique evacuation needs of persons with disabilities. Deaf children, already reliant on close visual cues, are continuously separated from caregivers amid bombings and chaos. With shelters overcrowded and dark, deaf communities are rendered effectively invisible.

• Breakdown in communication and total isolation: Article 9 and Article 21

During prolonged blackouts of electricity and internet (some lasting weeks), deaf individuals remain completely cut off from information and from the broader community. In one tragic case, a deaf mother in Rafah, with no internet and electricity, was unable to receive accessible early warning communication and information thus remained unaware that her neighbourhood was under evacuation orders. Hence, unable to flee with her children due to confusion and fear, she was killed together with her children in her home.

With no Palestinian Sign Language interpreters deployed or connected remotely via video call (for which deaf people in Gaza are in urgent need of e-sims supplies), no sign-language-based emergency guidance, and no accessible trauma services, deaf individuals are left to cope with crisis in isolation, with no contact nor communication with others — excluded from aid, protection, and even from mourning the loss of loved ones with others.

• Systemic exclusion in the West Bank: Article 15

In areas like Jenin, Nablus, and Tulkarem, Israeli military operations have become routine and indiscriminate. Deaf persons living in or near refugee camps face night raids, curfews, roadblocks, and arbitrary arrests. Because they cannot hear soldiers' commands or warnings, they are at increased risk of violence. This violates General Comment (GC) 7, which clarifies the obligations of State Parties under Article 4(3), requiring them to closely consult and actively involve people with disabilities in decision-making processes, including those in Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms.



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Furthermore, many internally displaced deaf individuals from Gaza have fled to the West Bank, where they face a second layer of marginalisation — lacking shelter, access to schools, interpreters, or social protection safety nets. They are invisible and excluded in all humanitarian response mechanisms. The Palestinian Union of the Deaf has not been included in humanitarian coordination mechanisms.

Israel's Noncompliance with the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) Orders

In July 2024, the ICJ issued precautionary measures demanding that Israel cease actions that violate the rights of Palestinians under occupation, including measures that amount to persecution or forcible displacement. However, these rulings have not translated into any concrete protections for deaf people. For instance:

- No accessible evacuation systems or visual alerts have been implemented.
- Deaf persons are omitted from all national and international contingency and humanitarian response plans.
- The targeting of schools and associations serving the deaf community continues with impunity, despite protections under international humanitarian law (IHL) for civilian infrastructure.

Deaf communities are among the most vulnerable; they are not only left behind, but their unique needs are completely unacknowledged by the occupying power and, too often, by the international aid agencies and human rights organisations.

International Inaction and Complicity

The failure of donor countries to act decisively in the face of ICJ rulings, or to condition aid on compliance with international law, exacerbates the suffering of the deaf community in Palestine. While several countries have called for “restraint,” none have suspended economic or military cooperation with Israel in meaningful terms.

- Deaf-led organisations are excluded from humanitarian coordination mechanisms (such as OCHA clusters), leaving a gap in advocacy and service provision.
- Humanitarian packages do not include sign language interpretation, accessible communication devices, or trauma-informed interventions for deaf survivors in sign language.
- Many UN agencies and INGOs still lack disability focal points with knowledge of how to effectively include deaf persons, their national sign language, and their communities, perpetuating neglect at every level of response.

International indifference and lack of intentional engagement with the State of Israel to act on the ICJ ruling imply that the protection rights of deaf people remain at risk.



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Recommendations of the World Federation of the Deaf and the Palestinian Union for Deaf in the Occupied Palestinian Territory

In light of all that has been exposed above, the World Federation of the Deaf and the Palestinian Union for the Deaf call for urgent and targeted measures to be put in place, including:

1. States parties must call on Israel to immediately cease fire and authorise aid, food and water to enter Gaza.
2. Establishing an accessible national early warning system with visual and sign language components, to be deployed in all areas of military activity.
3. Mandating the inclusion of deaf individuals and their representative organisations in all humanitarian and emergency planning and response frameworks, both local and international. To ensure their quality and equal participation in these spaces, a clear budget must be allocated to cover their accessibility needs, including the provision of sign language interpreters.
4. Rebuilding and expanding infrastructure serving deaf people, including schools, vocational centres, and community hubs destroyed in conflict.
5. Halting economic and military aid to Israel until meaningful guarantees are implemented to protect deaf civilians.
6. Implementing accountability mechanisms for the destruction of deaf institutions and the deaths of deaf civilians, in line with the Rome Statute and UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).
7. Recognising deaf-led Palestinian organisations as key actors in rebuilding, reconciliation, and policy formation, and ensuring their access to national and international humanitarian coordination mechanism platforms.

The Deaf community in Palestine lives and dies in silence, not by nature, but by the violence of erasure. They are unheard not only because they sign, but because the systems meant to protect them have refused to listen.

We call upon the UN Special Rapporteur and the UN CRPD Committee to ensure that the voices, needs, and rights of deaf Palestinians are meaningfully reflected in upcoming reports and in all future actions aimed at ensuring justice, freedom and dignity for people under occupation.

About the World Federation of the Deaf

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international non-governmental organisation representing and promoting approximately 70 million deaf people's human rights worldwide. The WFD is a federation of deaf organisations from 136 nations; its mission is to promote the human rights of deaf people and full, quality and equal access to all spheres of life, including self-determination, sign language, education, employment and community life. WFD has a consultative status in the United Nations and is a founding member of International Disability Alliance (IDA). (www.wfdeaf.org) Email: info@wfdeaf.org