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AND FINANCIAL SERVICES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT  
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**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
Washington, DC 20515-3812

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Antony Blinken  
United States Secretary of State  
The State Department  
Washington, DC 20521

Lloyd J. Austin III  
United States Secretary of Defense  
Department of Defense  
Washington, DC 20301-1000

November 19, 2024

Dear Secretary Blinken and Secretary Austin,

We write to you to express our deep concern about the ongoing humanitarian situation in Gaza and the potential for a regional health crisis that could stem from preventable diseases. It has come to our attention that some 7,000-10,000<sup>1</sup> children in Gaza have been unable to receive the 2nd round of the polio vaccination campaign. These children, especially the youngest ones, will not reap the benefit of the polio vaccine unless they receive their second dose soon — this week. To address this critical issue, we urge the Israeli government to support an immediate medical truce that would allow for a comprehensive vaccination campaign against polio in Gaza. We ask you to press the Government of Israel to hold to their plan and allow the medical teams (mostly women) to administer the polio vaccine to the children of Beit Lahia, Beit Hanoun, and Jabaliya no later than Thursday, November 21<sup>st</sup>, when the vaccination program ends.

Polio is a devastating and highly infectious disease that primarily impacts children. An infected individual can spread the disease to 5-7 unvaccinated individuals. The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated there are already at least 500 asymptomatic<sup>2</sup> infected people in Gaza; the threat of a wider regional outbreak is very real. However, this is a disease that vaccines can prevent with nearly 100% effectiveness — through proper vaccination.

In particular, the threat of a polio outbreak within Gaza poses a serious risk not only to the residents of the region but to neighboring nations, including Israel. Beit Lahia in North Gaza is near Ashdod — both share the aquifer with Gaza's middle area where polio was reported. The Palestinian village of Beit Lahia, near the northernmost border with Israel, shares the coastal aquifer with the Israeli cities of Ashkelon (pop. 151,149 in 2022) which is only 9 miles away (14.4km), and Ashdod (pop. 226,827 in 2022) which is only 19.4 miles (31 km) away. The Director of the Infectious Disease Institute at Soroka Medical Hospital in Beersheba, Israel said that polio would very likely spread through the aquifer as soon as the rainy season begins<sup>3</sup>.

Although Israel's vaccination rate for Polio is 98%, there are pockets of unvaccinated children, especially in the Orthodox community. About 12.5% of Ashkelon's population are Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) and 30% of Ashdod's population are Haredi. The recent spread of COVID-19,

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/second-round-polio-campaign-gaza-completed-amid-ongoing-conflict-and-attacks-unicef>

<sup>2</sup> **Stopping Polio in Gaza, for Us All — A Public Health Webinar** with summaries provided by the UNICEF and WHO doctors who developed the Gaza vaccination campaign, Nov 13, 2024

*"10 cases reported as per their information. For every symptomatic case there are 50-100 individuals with asymptomatic or mild viral symptoms. Thus 500 is probably an underestimate."*

— Jeffrey Goldhagen, M.D., MPH, Professor and Chief, Division of Community and Societal Pediatrics, University of Florida College of Medicine—Jacksonville, President, International Society for Social Pediatrics and Child Health

<sup>3</sup> (TOI Jul 23, 2024) <https://www.timesofisrael.com/disease-expert-warns-polio-outbreak-in-gaza-could-spread-to-israel/>

SARS, and H1N1 shows how vulnerable the U.S. is to viral epidemics. The substantial traffic between the U.S. and the Middle East, coupled with relatively low rates of polio immunization in this country, indicate that polio in Gaza is also a threat to American children. The US-Israel Visa Waiver Program permits contagions in Israel to quickly reach the U.S. A 2022 polio case in New York was genetically linked to a vaccine-derived virus found that year in Jerusalem and wastewater samples in London<sup>4</sup>.

The challenges presented by the current conflict have severely restricted access to basic healthcare and have intensified the urgency for life-saving medical intervention. Gaza has been under constant Israeli bombing, with virtually no aid entering the area in the past four weeks. Gaza's healthcare infrastructure has been severely strained, making it increasingly difficult to conduct essential immunizations. With polio outbreaks still a possibility, failure to prevent its spread would lead to loss of life from a preventable disease—an outcome that can be avoided if we act swiftly.

Implementing a temporary cessation of hostilities would enable medical teams to reach vulnerable populations, administer vaccinations, and prevent the resurgence of polio, which, if left unchecked, could spread beyond Gaza and into Israel and other neighboring nations. In addition to vaccination efforts, this truce would provide a critical window for increasing humanitarian assistance to Gaza, supplying essential medical resources and infrastructure support to help stabilize the current health crisis. The WHO and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) must close the vaccine program and destroy the remaining vaccines because oral polio vaccines (OPV's) are dangerous if not ingested — that's why it is vital to extend the polio vaccine campaign to the northernmost Gaza towns of Beit Lahia, Beit Hanoun, and Jabaliya.

To this end, we respectfully call upon you to urge the Israeli government to take proactive steps toward establishing a medical truce that can facilitate humanitarian access and assist the region in avoiding a larger-scale health crisis. By ensuring that necessary aid and vaccination efforts can proceed unimpeded, Israel and the global community can help avert an outbreak that could impact millions and strengthen regional health security.


We appreciate your consideration of this urgent request. Thank you for your commitment to protecting the health and safety of all communities across the region.

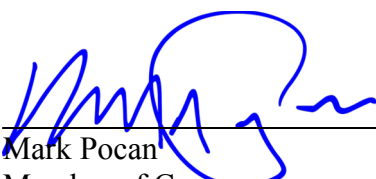
Sincerely,


A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Summer L. Lee". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Summer" and last name "Lee" clearly legible. The middle initial "L." is written in a smaller, more formal script between the first and last names.

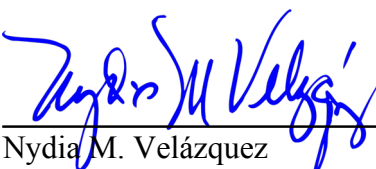
Summer L. Lee  
Member of Congress


<sup>4</sup> (NYTimes, Aug 12, 2022) <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/12/nyregion/polio-nyc-sewage.html>

  
Delia C. Ramirez  
Member of Congress


  
Mark Pocan  
Member of Congress


  
Jesús G. "Chuy" García  
Member of Congress


  
Nydia M. Velázquez  
Member of Congress

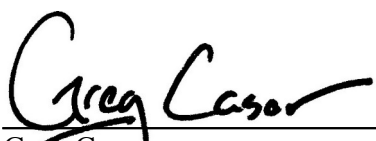
  
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