



WHEN DOES IT END?

Protecting children and caretakers amid the conflict in Gaza.

On October 7th Palestinian armed groups entered Israel from Gaza and conducted attacks that saw the kidnapping of 240 people and killing of 1,162. In response, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) launched a military operation in the Gaza strip. Starting October 8th, the indiscriminate bombing and targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure, the near complete siege of the Gaza strip, cuts in import of basic commodities, collapse of basic services and mass forced displacement of civilians have taken an unprecedented toll on civilians and especially children inside the Gaza strip. As of February 9th, at least 27,947 people have been killed in Gaza since the beginning of the military operation, including 11,500 children according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza. During a temporary ceasefire between November 24th and December 1st, 2023, at least 110 Israeli and foreign hostages were released in exchange for 180 Palestinian prisoners. In the West Bank, between October 7th 2023 and February 9th 2024, 384 Palestinians, including 97 children, have been killed mainly by Israeli forces, but also Israeli settlers. Numbers received also show that Between Oct 7th and February 9th, 10 Israelis have been killed in attacks in the West Bank and West Jerusalem, including 4 Israeli soldiers and one civilian shot by the IDF.

SOS Children's Villages provides services to children without or at the risk of losing parental care in both Israel and Palestine. SOS Children's Villages Israel runs two children's villages - in Migdal Ha'emek and in Arad. It also runs an emergency centre in Arad and a family strengthening programme and youth houses for Bedouin communities. SOS Children's Villages Palestine runs family strengthening programmes and has two villages - in Bethlehem (West Bank), and in Rafah (Gaza Strip). The village in Rafah is currently hosting children and their caretakers and IDP families, and provide shelter, water and sanitation and mental health services as well as food and non-food items to people in our care.

As the fundamental rights of children and their care takers are under attack, we call on parties to the conflict to abide by their responsibilities under international law and do everything to protect the lives of all civilians and especially children. To this end, the following should be prioritised in order to uphold the safety and dignity of children and caretakers alike:

1. Protection and provision of basic services to children without parental care and children at risk of losing parental care:

- Thousands of children caught-up in crossfire or being indiscriminately targeted are experiencing unprecedented levels of trauma. Ongoing grave violations of children's rights in the conflict include being abducted, killed or maimed, attacks against schools and hospitals and denial of humanitarian assistance.
- In international humanitarian law, children are provided with the same rights to protection as adult civilians; however, due to their special protection, food, medical and safety needs, they are afforded additional special protection.¹
- For all children, the loss and trauma from this conflict, on top of previous spikes of violence in Palestine and Israel, is taking a heavy toll on their mental health and well-being -with long-term effects on their development. Children who lose parental care are particularly vulnerable as they are not guaranteed the caring bonds needed to help them



develop resilience and overcome traumatic experiences. Further, they are most at risk of exclusion in humanitarian response efforts.

- As a matter of urgency, adequate referral and family tracing mechanisms for children who have lost parental care in Gaza should be in place and mainstreamed in humanitarian programmes and coordination structures. UNICEF estimates that about 17,000 children were unaccompanied or separated from their parents as of early February in Gaza.ⁱⁱ While there is no official estimate for the number of children who have lost parents in this conflict, some go as high as 18,000 for the Gaza strip.ⁱⁱⁱ Children have also lost parents as a result of the attacks in Israel on October 7th.

2. Protection of civilians and respect of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL):

- We welcomed the temporary ceasefire which provided a glimpse of relief to desperate civilians in November 2023.
- In the absence of a permanent end to the conflict, we call on parties to agree on an unconditional and long-lasting ceasefire that will allow for adequate and desperately needed aid to reach those in need, treatment of the sick and wounded, and the release, safe passage and return of all hostages. Only a durable end to violence and destruction will stop the suffering of Palestinian and Israeli civilians.
- All parties to the conflict must ensure that civilians are not targeted and are protected from harm. Additionally, parties should not target civilian infrastructure nor use them for military purposes. The reports of targeting of civilians as well as facilities such as hospitals, schools and humanitarian programme sites could constitute breaches of international law.
- We call for the immediate end to grave violations being committed against children in the ongoing conflict. We denounce the killing and maiming of children; sexual violence against children; the abduction of children; attacks on schools and hospitals; and the denial of humanitarian access.
- The rights of children – as listed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - are being violated daily, including their right to life, survival and development, their right to education, their right to protection from abuse, violence or neglect, their right to health care and medical assistance, and their right to nutrition. We urge parties to the conflict to abide by their responsibilities under IHL and IHRL to ensure that all civilians, and especially children, are protected and not put in arms way. All parties are forbidden to perform any form of violent act against civilians, including children, under article 3 of the 4th Geneva Convention.
- We call for an end to the collective punishment^{iv} as prohibited by IHL.^{v,vi,vii} As of 2023, with 47.3% of Gazans under 18 years of age^{viii} most children living in Gaza have experienced collective punishment, and therefore the diminished protection and violation of their fundamental rights. Prior to the current conflict, and for close to 18 years Palestinians have “collectively been punished for the actions of a few”.^{ix,x} Measures by Israeli authorities including strict limitations of movement to and from Gaza, and restricted import and export of goods have affected the development of children and the protection of their rights.
- With urgency, all hostages, especially children, should be safely released to their families.
- The protection of civilians and alleviation of human suffering should be the core priority of the international community, with pressure applied on parties to the conflict to abide by their obligations under IHL and IHRL.



- While 1.7 out of 2.3 million people are reported to be internally displaced inside the Gaza strip, parties should refrain from forcibly displacing civilian populations, in line with their obligation under international law. They should also guarantee safe passage for civilians inside the Gaza strip at all times.
- Powerholders should allow safe passage, with timely, consistent and transparent procedures for civilians to leave Gaza, especially for medical treatment and family reunification. All Gazans leaving the strip should have their rights to return guaranteed and upheld by all power holders unconditionally.

3. Increase in principled aid delivery and humanitarian access:

- We ask for diplomatic pressure to be put on powerholders to significantly increase the flow of humanitarian aid entering Gaza.
- The diplomatic community, donors and UN agencies should spare no effort in securing consistent and safe access for principled humanitarian assistance, so that adequate humanitarian programmes are able to run unhindered across Gaza, including in the northern part of the strip.
- Continued hostilities, including bombardments, high scale displacement and the lack of humanitarian access to and inside Gaza are impeding the aid response and preventing necessary lifesaving assistance from reaching hundreds of thousands of Gazans.
- The international community must continue and scale up its diplomatic engagement with power holders to secure consistent and unimpeded access for aid to reach Gaza. According to OCHA, 11,319 truckloads of humanitarian aid entered Gaza via Egypt and Israel over the past 16 weeks, between October 21st, 2023, and February 7th. Before the current crisis, an average of 500 truckloads used to enter Gaza (mostly via Kerem Shalom) every working day. Current levels of aid, especially in light of the ban on commercial imports into Gaza, are unable to respond to the sheer scale of humanitarian needs. Further, they cannot replace commercial imports of basic commodities that were already insufficient under the blockade that preceded the attacks on October 7th.
- We appeal to key institutional donors and UN agencies to commit new flexible funding to the humanitarian response and channel it through national and international aid organizations already working on the ground. Specific attention should be given to the needs of vulnerable groups, including but not limited to, unaccompanied minors and children who have lost parental care, women-headed and child-headed households as well as pregnant and lactating women. Overall, protection activities, including child protection, should be prioritised as key lifesaving components in this emergency.
- As a matter of urgency, donors should increase their contribution to the flash appeal and secure funding for current and upcoming revised response plans for 2024. Additional funding commitments should be new and not redirected funding from other crises; which would otherwise deprive other vulnerable populations from much needed aid.
- The suspension of funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) will severely jeopardize the already dire situation of more than 2 million civilians, including about one million children, who depend on the agency's aid inside Gaza. As a matter of extreme urgency, UN member states should continue to support UNRWA's vital relief efforts in Gaza and revert decisions to halt funding. Further, UNRWA's humanitarian work and basic services across the region should be supported, including education to more than half a million students and health care for children.



4. Provision of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS):

- With millions of children and adults impacted by the conflict, we urge individual and institutional donors to prioritise the provision of mental health and psychosocial support through funding earmarked for emergency relief and in humanitarian programming on the ground.
- The combined factors of cyclical conflict and direct exposure to extreme violence and loss of lives, have generated high levels of psychosocial distress for children and adults.
- The constant decline of living conditions in the strip, coupled with spikes of violence in both Gaza^{xi} and the West Bank have resulted in about 200,000 adults and 300,000 children experiencing mild to severe mental health disorders in 2020 across the OPT, according to the UN in 2022.^{xii} According to estimates from UNICEF, more than one million children are now in need of mental health care inside Gaza, or nearly the entire children population of the strip.^{xiii}
- While previous UN led response plans in the OPT have included mental health in sectoral priorities, we call for additional new funding to be committed for mental health and psychosocial support for both adults and children in the immediate and long term. While the overall mental health toll of this conflict and the occupation on all civilians, including children, is recognised, this response component continues to be overlooked during and after emergencies against other pressing needs by donors.

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ⁱ See Denise Platter, *Protection of Children in International Humanitarian Law*, in International Review of the Red Cross, No 240, 1984, available at <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/article/other/57jimat.htm#:~:text=International%20humanitarian%20law%20provides%20general%20protection%20for%20children,children%20taking%20part%20in%20hostilities%20are%20also%20protected.>

ⁱⁱ UNICEF, Stories of loss and grief: At least 17,000 children are estimated to be unaccompanied or separated from their parents in the Gaza Strip, February 2023, available at <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/stories-loss-and-grief-least-17000-children-are-estimated-be-unaccompanied-or>

ⁱⁱⁱ Euro-Med Monitor, Israel's war on the Gaza Strip has affected half a million children so far, November 2023, available at <https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/5933/Israel%E2%80%99s-war-on-the-Gaza-Strip-has-affected-half-a-million-children-so-far-#:~:text=AR%20Geneva%20-%20Approximately%20half%20a%20million%20Palestinian,whose%20family%20homes%20have%20been%20damaged%20or%20destroyed.>

^{iv} "Collective punishment refers not only to criminal punishment, but also to other types of sanctions, harassment or administrative action taken against a group in retaliation for an act committed by an individual/s who are considered to form part of the group. Such punishment therefore targets persons who bear no responsibility for having committed the conduct in question."- [Collective punishments | How does law protect in war? - Online casebook \(icrc.org\)](#)

^v ICRC, Gaza closure: not another year!, 2010, available at <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/update/palestine-update-140610.htm>

^{vi} See <https://www.unrwa.org/activity/protection-gaza-strip>

^{vii} See <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15473.doc.htm>

^{viii} UNICEF, Situation Analysis of Children's Rights and Wellbeing in the State of Palestine, July 2023, available at [Situation Analysis of Children's Rights and Wellbeing in the UNICEF State of Palestine.pdf](#)

^{ix} [Collective punishment in Gaza must end: Israel's blockade enters its 7th year – UN Special Rapporteur | OHCHR](#)

^x Michael Lynk, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967.

^{xi} Before the current conflict, several spikes of violence occurred in Gaza, the latest in 2021, 2022, and in early 2023.

^{xii} UN, United Nations Common Country Analysis for the Occupied Palestinian Territory, November 2022

^{xiii} UNICEF, Stories of loss and grief: At least 17,000 children are estimated to be unaccompanied or separated from their parents in the Gaza Strip, February 2024, available at <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/stories-loss-and-grief-least-17000-children-are-estimated-be-unaccompanied-or>