

A LIVING NIGHTMARE

Gaza one year on

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Our work in Gaza

Save the Children has been working in Gaza, and across the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) for more than 30 years. We are one of the largest international non-governmental organisations working inside Gaza, addressing both the immediate humanitarian and long-term development needs of children and their families. Save the Children works in 120 countries around the world, and we provide aid and advocate on the basis of the needs and rights of all children. We are non-religious, non-partisan and politically neutral – our sole focus is the plight of children.

The oPt context is a unique challenge for a child-rights based organisation such as Save the Children. Long-term development needs are compounded by relatively frequent, short-term emergencies – armed conflict, violence and natural disasters – and the ongoing occupation, which permeates all aspects of children’s lives in Gaza and throughout the oPt.

One year ago – on 7 July 2014 – Israel launched operation ‘Protective Edge’, with the stated objective of stopping rocket attacks coming from Gaza. The 51-day conflict that followed – consisting of a ground invasion, and air and naval strikes on Gaza – destroyed homes, health centres and schools. During that time, rockets continued to be launched by Palestinian militant groups into Israel.

The conflict was brutal, deadly and terrifying for children in both Israel and Gaza. In Gaza, 551 children were killed, and 3,436 were injured, of whom 10% suffered permanent disability as a result. In Israel, one child was also killed and 270 children were injured.

One year on, homes and schools in Gaza have yet to be rebuilt and children still play amid the rubble – often in places where unexploded ordinance has not yet been removed. The violence continues – our team on the ground reports that every week several rockets are fired into Israel from Gaza and airstrikes are conducted against Gaza.

A year on, children in Gaza continue to be victims of persistent rights violations, including exposure to violence, risk of death and injury from both state and non-state actors, arrest and detention, displacement, lack of safe access to good-quality education, poverty, discrimination and restricted movement. Meanwhile, children in Israel report that they live in fear of a return to conflict.



Children talk with Save the Children staff outside the ruins of their home in Gaza

Photo: Anas Baber/ Save the Children

Our humanitarian response

Save the Children has been working in conflict zones for more than 90 years, and we know what it takes to deliver results for children in these environments. Last year, although it was extremely difficult to deliver aid inside Gaza during the fighting, we worked with our local partners in areas that were at times under fire to deliver life-saving medical supplies, food, and other essentials and to provide counselling support to help children recover from traumatic experiences. Our mission compels us to deliver direct support to children in need and to speak out when children are killed and harmed, wherever those children are.

In the past year, our teams on the ground have reached 217,693 people in Gaza – including 145,945 children – with humanitarian assistance. We have distributed food parcels, medical supplies and treatment, newborn baby care kits, and more than 3 million litres of domestic and drinking water. We have reached thousands of children with counselling services, including supporting a dedicated children’s 24-hour helpline, staffed by specially trained volunteer counsellors.

Trauma and distress: the ongoing impact of the conflict on children

In April and May 2015, Save the Children field teams completed an assessment in Gaza, looking at the impact of the crisis on the mental health of school-aged children (6–15 years) a year after the conflict, with the aim of understanding their evolving needs. We interviewed 413 children and 352 mothers living in the hardest-hit areas (those that had been heavily bombarded and had a high number of civilian casualties). Many of the children and mothers we interviewed had witnessed bombing and the deaths of friends and loved ones.

Unexpectedly high levels of continued severe emotional distress and trauma were reported to us by children and their parents in Gaza:

- **Nightmares:** on average, seven out of ten children in the worst-hit areas of Gaza are suffering from regular nightmares, with the problem so severe in some areas that eight out of ten children suffer from nightmares every single night. One father reported *“My children were in the street [during the war] and saw the body pieces on the street after a shelling. My son is now traumatised, and my daughter has nightmares and wakes up frightened. I don’t know how to help them.”*
- **Bedwetting:** 75% of the children interviewed in the worst-hit areas are experiencing unusual bedwetting regularly, with 47% of children in one particularly badly affected area experiencing it every night.
- **Fear:** up to 89% of parents reported that their children suffer consistent feelings of fear, while more than 70% of children in worst-hit areas worry about another war.
- **School refusal:** more than 50% of children in some areas do not want to go to school anymore, or have poor attendance. Some explained that they are afraid to leave their homes; others feel unsafe in school buildings, some of which were damaged or destroyed in the conflict. Some children who have had to move to new

areas after their homes were destroyed feel too anxious to try and make new friends.

- **Listlessness and lack of motivation:** three in ten children are demonstrating decreased motivation and listlessness, according to their parents.
- **Isolation and withdrawal:** parents report that two in ten children are showing symptoms of increased isolation and appear withdrawn.

Children continue to suffer distress

These findings confirm what children and our own staff in Gaza tell us.

Even during times of relative calm, children and their families are exposed to high degrees of violence and deprivation. Drones and F-16s are common in the skies of Gaza and live ammunition is routinely used in the border areas and at sea, making a terrifying environment for children both in Gaza and those close to the border in Israel.

One 14-year-old boy in Gaza who called the Save the Children-supported helpline asked: *“Why do Gaza’s children have no rights? Why does no one feel our pain? I want one human to come and live in Gaza just for two hours. I don’t want him to stay for a day, just two hours to feel what we feel. There is no food, no electricity, no water. Our future is gone. All the children here need psychiatric treatment. And for the children whose families have been killed, how will they live?”*

Our team has found that children in Gaza live in constant anxiety about the possibility of the next war; psychologists’ reports from Israel suggest similar concerns for children there.

In Gaza, children and families tell us that pressures associated with the blockade make normal life harder for children. The restrictions on the movement of people and goods in and out of Gaza have a real and negative impact on children’s day-to-day lives and health, for those emotionally affected by the conflict, on their chances of recovery.



Photo: Anas Baber/Save the Children

Children carry tarpaulin for shelter during a storm in Gaza, in winter 2014.

Children have reported feeling trapped and unable to escape Gaza. Life simply can’t ‘go back to normal’ for children in Gaza – because of the blockade, homes and schools can’t be easily rebuilt, and children feel that war is always close by (indeed, the rockets from Gaza and airstrikes into Gaza continue every week). All of this means that children in Gaza are

unlikely to recover as quickly and as well as they might otherwise. It's worth noting that children in Israel also report that they are afraid of a return to conflict.

The daily struggle to survive

During the outbreak of conflict last year, Save the Children faced daily challenges from with the consequences of the blockade on a daily basis – among other things, we struggled to send in emergency relief teams for our overworked and exhausted staff, who worked tirelessly with local partner non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to deliver life-saving support and provide psychosocial support to thousands of children.

Now, as the blockaded enclave struggles to recover from a devastating war, we're very concerned that food, medicine and fuel are in short supply. Even in 'normal times' over the last eight years (since the blockade has been in place) Gaza has witnessed peaks of scarcity affecting the entire population.

Our regular humanitarian assessments on the ground in Gaza demonstrated that before and after the conflict the blockade has affected every aspect of children's lives in Gaza: domestic, communal, environmental, social, educational, psychological and physical.

The results of these assessments show that the blockade has been the single greatest contributor to endemic and long-lasting household poverty in Gaza. This has meant that families often find themselves unable to buy nutritious food and are less able to produce nutritious food themselves – resulting in a dependence on aid agencies such as Save the Children. We distributed 4,000 food parcels during the conflict, and continue to support parents' livelihoods now.

An earlier comprehensive assessment and report by Save the Children and Medical Aid for Palestinians, [Gaza's Children: Falling Behind](#), found that levels of stunting or long-term exposure to chronic malnutrition are high, and anaemia, usually caused by dietary iron deficiency, affects most children in Gaza.

Good nutrition is essential for both physical and mental health – healthy food can play an important role in preventing and managing mental health problems such as depression, and helping children to recover emotionally from trauma. The Save the Children-supported specialist 24-hour helpline has received numerous calls from children and parents worried about where the next meal is coming from – and concerned about the impact this stress will have on their children.

Save the Children supports more than 3,000 children every month with individual counselling sessions and group therapy. For the majority of these children, home is a makeshift shelter, a small caravan or a partially bombed house. This is because their own homes, destroyed during the conflict, have yet to be rebuilt – another sad result of the restrictions of the blockade which limit the kinds and types of materials that can be brought into Gaza.

Despite NGOs' efforts to bring in medical supplies, Gaza's health sector suffers from critical shortages of equipment and supplies. Damaged and overcrowded schools and a heavily polluted environment are also exacting a high price on children's mental and physical health.

“Now she doesn't talk”



“Out of my five daughters, the only one uninjured in the war was Nada, and now she doesn't talk,” says Ahmad. “She cries a lot. She is exhausted all the time, suffers nightmares.

“There are so many challenges to overcome now in Gaza – especially the health system. It doesn't work properly here; we need support for so many of our injured children after this war. We have lived through three wars over the last seven years. For any

human anywhere in the world, this is too much. The blockade alone makes it so hard to survive – we cannot import what we need to rebuild, or get enough supplies, let alone with a war as well. To think about the future is impossible.”

Gaza's residents are being squeezed into a shrunken, increasingly unhealthy space with almost no clean water. It is the lack of potable and domestic water that makes children particularly vulnerable to the spread of diseases such as typhoid fever and diarrhoea – with serious implications for child mortality.

Homelessness, a sense of helplessness, and previous and repeated exposure to extreme violence and suffering, coupled with soaring unemployment for parents and very limited mental health support infrastructure for children (Gaza has just one hospital dedicated to mental health, and no children's wards in it) results in a thorough denial of the space and support for affected children to recover from the mental trauma of war.

One 12 year old girl said to the Save the Children team in Gaza: *“We saw our home being destroyed. I was crying because we have memories and dreams there, from the day of our birth. I'm afraid they may bomb us. We're now in my grandfather's house. My memories, pictures, clothes, toys... everything is gone. I can't live, I only feel pain.”*

Our work on the ground

Our mission compels us to give voice to the children suffering from the decisions of adults and to deliver direct support to children in need. In addition to providing counselling and psychosocial support services in Gaza, we are working with partner organisations to address the everyday needs – from screening children for ear infections, to rehabilitating greenhouses to help farmers increase crop yields, to replacing or rehabilitating damaged water wells and sewage networks. We've helped repair kindergartens and other spaces for children that were damaged in the conflict, and we provide them with stationery, educational games and other equipment to help them re-open. We've been helping families to repair their homes by distributing metal sheets, plastic sheeting and, over the winter, blankets and warm clothes for children. We also help children to understand their rights through an engaging training programme.

In every conflict and every disaster we speak out about the biggest and most serious risks to children. We are sharing the findings of our assessment to demonstrate the ongoing war children in Gaza were fighting – in their nightmares, their games, silently, in quiet corners, in their memories.

Recommendations

1. **The international community should increase funding for specialist counselling and psychosocial support inside Gaza** – ensuring that children have access to safe play areas, that NGOs have sufficient funding for school and community-based counselling services, and that education and health staff are trained to detect and support children struggling with severe emotional distress.
2. **The international community should ensure that the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism is functioning fully**, and includes benchmarks to assess progress and enables the rapid reconstruction of schools, health centres and homes as quickly as possible so that children can return to some semblance of normality and safety. Any agreement established to move goods into Gaza must adhere to international humanitarian and human rights law.
3. **The international community must demand an end to violations of international law**, and push for greater accountability of all parties, including guarantees of non-repetition.
4. As a matter of priority for the health, mental health and wellbeing of Gaza's children, Israel should lift the blockade to enable, among others, psychosocial staff to move freely in and out of Gaza, to allow the rebuilding of homes and schools, and also to allow goods in and out of Gaza – to enable children to regain a sense of normalcy and recover from the trauma they have been through.

A plea to the global public

Save the Children is already on the ground in Gaza, helping children who are frightened, traumatised and in need of urgent support. Our team is there, helping keep them safe and providing medicine, medical supplies and educational support

But with Gaza out of the news, our funds are running low. We ask people everywhere to remember the children of Gaza, and all of those struggling to recover from conflict around the world by donating to our Children in Crisis program at www.savethechildren.org.au/childrenincrisis.

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