

OPINION

Innocence under fire: The deepening crisis for Gaza's children and their cry for help

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A Palestinian child escapes with her father after family was killed in an Israeli missile that struck their home in Gaza on 18 January 2024 [Mohammed Asad]

Amidst Israel's relentless military onslaught against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, the plight of the children in the besieged enclave worsens by the day. The need for psychological and social support for these young souls was evident even before the current escalation, but now it has reached a critical juncture.

In the words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, Gaza has transformed tragically into a graveyard for children. Shockingly, approximately 17,000 children in Gaza are now without the care of their families or are separated from them, intensifying their psychological and social anguish. Doctors on the ground have coined a grim abbreviation: "WCNSF" stands for "wounded child, no surviving family" and highlights the heartrending reality faced by countless Palestinian children in Gaza. Each day, dozens of children endure amputations, leaving them with permanent disabilities, while the spectre of famine looms large, exacerbating an already dire situation of malnutrition and anaemia.

The violence ravaging Gaza inflicts deep psychological wounds on its children

They urgently require support to navigate the daily horrors they witness and endure. As their numbers in need of assistance grow, the challenge becomes increasingly daunting and complex.

UNICEF underscores the critical necessity of providing psychological, social and emotional support to all children facing severe violence in Gaza. Yet the consequences of war extend far beyond the immediate, casting a long shadow over their future. The trauma they endure threatens to erode their trust in the world; shatter their sense of purpose; and hinder their ability to connect with others and themselves, fostering a pervasive sense of insecurity that may haunt them for life.

Children in their tender years of development are uniquely vulnerable to the psychological toll of war. Their cognitive and emotional faculties are still maturing, rendering them ill-equipped to process the horrors they witness. They lean heavily on their caregivers for solace and security, but when these pillars falter under the weight of war's trauma, children are left adrift in a sea of fear and abandonment.

Moreover, their limited understanding of the conflict compounds their distress, leaving them grappling with confusion and helplessness. Disruptions to their routines, coupled with exposure to the harrowing sights, sounds and smells of war, further exacerbate their anguish, triggering intense emotional reactions and deepening their psychological scars. We noticed a girl freezing at the sound of thunder and a boy exhibiting severe anxiety as he talks about seeing a tank.

The humanitarian crisis facing Gaza's children demands urgent intervention from the international community and humanitarian organisations. Their innocence, combined with their dependence on caregivers and the relentless onslaught of war, leaves them exceptionally vulnerable. It is imperative that we prioritise their well-being, offering them the support and resources they need not only to survive, but also to recover and thrive amidst the rubble of Gaza. Their cries for help must not go unheard, for they represent the hope and future of a generation caught up in the fire of genocide.

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P.S.

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