

PRESSESTATEMENT

Children in Gaza-conflict will suffer for years to come

„The fear of violence has become a way in which children understand the world.“

Luma Tarazi, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support advisor for Save the Children

Berlin/ Gaza 21. Mai 2021 - After 11 days of violence which ended with a ceasefire, children in Gaza are suffering from fear and anxiety, a lack of sleep, and are displaying worrying signs of distress, such as constant shaking and bedwetting, Save the Children said today. Palestinian and Israeli children will bear the mental consequences for years to come, the organisation warned.

At least 65 Palestinian children in Gaza and two Israeli children have reportedly been killed between May 10th, when the escalation started, and this morning's ceasefire.

Fifty-one schools in Gaza have been damaged by airstrikes and three have been reported damaged in Israel. Schools across both are closed due to airstrikes by Israeli forces and rockets fired from Gaza, and thousands of children and their families in Gaza have been displaced.

Children who live in a constant fear of violence can suffer from long-lasting ongoing anxieties and develop physiological responses to stress which can have long lasting effects, Save the Children said

Earlier research by Save the Children after the 50-day conflict in 2014 revealed that after a year, seven out of ten children in the worst-hit areas in Gaza were still suffering from nightmares, and 75% were still bedwetting regularly. Up to 89% of parents reported that their children were consistently afraid. Research in 2019 after the escalation in 2018 found similar results.

“The difference this time is that the exposure and intensity to the violence have been worse. The attacks have been going on day and night - children were forced to hide around the clock, and they're terrified of the constant sound of bombs. Many are shaking non-stop, and are suffering from sleep deprivation, nausea, and severe distress”, said Luma Tarazi, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support advisor for Save the Children in the occupied Palestinian territory.

“Because of overstimulation of the nervous system, their bodies cannot calm down. Even if the violence ends, children will not be able to relax or sleep – instead they will remain distressed. We expect that this emotional toll will prevent them from playing, relaxing, focusing in school. Their recovery will take a long time.”

Amal*, 10, lives in Gaza with her family. Before the ceasefire came into effect, she said:

“I feel a lot of terror, and now that terror is getting bigger. We started to sleep in the hallway because I’m so afraid. I can’t go anywhere without my mum or dad. The windows [in our home] shattered on us and my mom had to protect us. I’m really afraid and fear has spread everywhere. I stay up all night long, I can’t sleep from the sounds of their airstrikes.”

Save the Children emphasised that there is an alarming need in Gaza for psychosocial support for children and their families. This form of support teaches children and adults resilience, and helps them to express their fears in social settings such as families and friends.

Ms. Tarazi continued: “With the right support, in general most children and adults will be able to cope. But in an extreme situation like this, more children will not be able to cope without specialist care, especially as the fear of violence has become a way in which they understand the world.”

Save the Children said that the lack of underground shelters and warning sirens, have exacerbated the constant fear of children in Gaza for what might happen.

As psychosocial support in Gaza is limited and the specialist support for children is hardly available, Save the Children urgently calls on donors to step up funding for the mental health support for children. The organisation will do rapid needs assessments to work out the exact needs and costings, and plans to step up its psychosocial support in Gaza as soon as it’s safe to do so.

Jason Lee, Save the Children’s country director in the occupied Palestinian territory, said that the international community needs to step up for the wellbeing of children.

“We have already started our response by expanding our support of a partner-organisation that was struggling with over 20,000 calls a day from people needing urgent mental health and psychosocial support. Parents see their children crying, they see them shivering and being afraid, while they have to cope with the conflict themselves as well. The recent escalation has led to a truly heart-breaking situation for tens of thousands of people.”

“We welcome the ceasefire. Now, the international community must work with all parties to come to a long-term solution. It must urgently work to create conditions for renewed talks between the parties for a just solution that tackles the root causes of this escalation, upholding equal rights for both Palestinian and Israeli children. That includes an end to the 14-year long blockade and the decades-long occupation as the only sustainable resolution to the conflict. This will ensure that all children in the region can live in peace.”

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Kontakt:

Save the Children Deutschland e.V.

Pressestelle – Claudia Kepp

Tel.: +49 (30) 27 59 59 79 – 280

Mail: claudia.kepp@savethechildren.de

Für mehr aktuelle Informationen folgen Sie uns online:

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Über Save the Children

Im Nachkriegsjahr 1919 gründete die britische Sozialreformerin und Kinderrechtlerin Eglantyne Jebb Save the Children, um Kinder in Deutschland und Österreich vor dem Hungertod zu retten. Heute ist die inzwischen größte unabhängige Kinderrechtsorganisation der Welt in 120 Ländern tätig. Save the Children setzt sich ein für Kinder in Kriegen, Konflikten und Katastrophen. Für eine Welt, die die Rechte der Kinder achtet. Eine Welt, in der alle Kinder gesund und sicher leben und frei und selbstbestimmt aufwachsen und lernen können – seit über 100 Jahren.