

Gaza's children traumatized by war, many wake up screaming



Suzy Ishkontana, 7, and her father Riad were the only survivors of their family after an Israeli air strike destroyed the building they lived in [Abdel Kareem Hana/AP]

Gaza City, June 3 (RHC)-- As Gaza tries to recover from the deadly 11-day Israeli attack, mothers and mental health workers have raised concerns that the psychological effects of the violence will long linger among the children in the Strip.

Hala Shehada, a 28-year-old mother from northern Gaza's Beit Hanoun area, told Al Jazeera when the air strikes started hitting Gaza earlier this month she found herself reliving the tragic memories of the 2014 Israeli offensive as if it were "yesterday."

"The latest offensive on Gaza took me back to the darkest memories from six years ago when my husband was killed," said Shehada. "But this time was even worse. My six-year-old daughter Toleen, who was born five months after her father was killed, was horrified during the offensive."

Young people were among the most affected groups during the latest Israeli operation on the besieged coastal enclave. Israeli air and artillery attacks killed 253 Palestinians, including 66 children, and left more than 1,900 people wounded.

Two children were among 12 people killed in Israel by rockets fired by Hamas and other armed groups from Gaza during the same period. The Israeli onslaught also completely destroyed 1,800 residential units in Gaza and partially demolished at least 14,300 others. Tens of thousands of Palestinians have been forced to take shelter in UN-run schools.

Although a ceasefire was reached between Israel and Hamas on May 21, many families continue to suffer. The majority were already traumatised by the 51-day Israeli bombing campaign of Gaza in 2014. That offensive killed more than 2,200 Palestinians, including 500 children.

At least 67 Palestinians were killed and hundreds more wounded in a night of intense Israeli attacks that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas described as a "massacre" at the time. Shehada described her experience of both wars. "Living in Gaza means having to relive trauma time and time again. War is the ugliest thing in the world. And the real war is the one you have to live with your memories of it."

"It's very hard to be a mother in Gaza. I was terrified myself. My daughter's mental state deteriorated severely during the offensive. She was crying hysterically when she heard the bombs," said Shehada. "Even now with the ceasefire, Toleen suffers from nightmares. She wakes up screaming in the middle of the night. I try my best to comfort her, but it kills me to see her like this," she added, sobbing.

Like many mothers in Gaza, Shehada said both her and her daughter need psychological rehabilitation. "Whatever I managed to overcome in the 2014 offensive has come back to haunt me," she said. But without many mental health support services available in Gaza, Shehada said most people in the Strip deal with the trauma alone.

"The suffering of my child makes me wonder how many children in Gaza have been suffering throughout their lifetime from the trauma of wars."

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