

UN warns water shortages a deadly risk for Gaza children

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Geneva, December 20 (RHC)-- Limited access to clean water and sanitation amid Israel's relentless bombardment pose a grave risk to children in Gaza, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has warned.

Huge masses of displaced people herded into the southern Gaza Strip by the war are accessing only 1.5 to 2 litres of water per day, well below the recommended requirement for survival, the UN agency stated on Wednesday. The crisis, antagonised by limited aid deliveries and the destruction of infrastructure, puts huge numbers of vulnerable children at risk of disease, it added.

Pushed by Israel's continued onslaught across the enclave, hundreds of thousands of people, around half of them estimated to be children, have been pushed into the city of Rafah since early December, and are in desperate need of food, water, shelter, medicines and protection, UNICEF said. As demand continues to rise, water and sanitation systems in the city are in an extremely critical state.

UNICEF says that 3 litres are required daily for survival. The amount rises to 15 litres if water required for washing and cooking is also counted. "Access to sufficient amounts of clean water is a matter of life and death, and children in Gaza have barely a drop to drink," said UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell.

"Children and their families are having to use water from unsafe sources that are highly salinated or polluted. Without safe water, many more children will die from deprivation and disease in the coming days."

Using unsafe water and lack of hygiene is a "dramatic" risk factor for children, who are more vulnerable to waterborne disease, dehydration and malnutrition, according to UNICEF.

Humanitarian aid deliveries simply do not meet the needs of the population for basic survival. This causes a shortage in water and hygiene products that is further compounded by the fact that a large percentage of sanitation facilities have been either destroyed or simply cannot accommodate the large number of displaced Palestinians congregating in specific locations.

"We are doing everything we can to meet the needs of the people in Gaza, but the equipment and supplies we've managed to provide are far from enough," said Russell. "The constant bombing, along with the restrictions on materials and fuel allowed into the territory, are preventing critical progress. We urgently need these supplies to repair damaged water systems."

Doctors and aid workers have been warning of the spread of disease and epidemics, since the start of Israel's "indiscriminate" bombing campaign after Hamas's October 7 Hamas attacks. According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO), from November 29 to December 10, cases of diarrhoea in children under five jumped 66 percent to 59,895, and increased by 55 percent for the rest of the population.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said last week that the WHO has reported cases of meningitis, chickenpox, jaundice and upper respiratory tract infections as well.

The UN health agency cautioned that the figures likely did not provide the full picture because of a lack of complete information with the health system and other services in Gaza near collapse.

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