

UN estimates 17,000 Gaza children left unaccompanied amid Israel's war of aggression

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Palestinian children cook a meal among tents for displaced people while Israel's genocidal attacks on Gaza continue [Abed Zagout/Anadolu Agency]

United Nations, February 2 (RHC)-- At least 17,000 children in the Gaza Strip have been left unaccompanied or separated from their families nearly four months into Israel's assault on the enclave, the United Nations children's agency estimates. Nearly all children in the strip also require mental health support, UNICEF said on Friday.

"Each [child] has a heartbreaking story of loss and grief," said Jonathan Crickx, UNICEF's chief of communication for the occupied Palestinian territories.

"This [17,000] figure corresponds to 1 percent of the overall displaced population – 1.7 million people," he told a media briefing via video-link from Jerusalem, saying the number was an estimation as it is near impossible to verify information under current conditions. Each one "is a child who is coming to terms with a horrible new reality", he added.

Crickx said that tracing who the unaccompanied children were was proving "extremely difficult", as they were sometimes brought to a hospital wounded or in shock, and "they simply can't even say their names". He said that during conflicts, it was common for extended families to take care of children who lost their parents.

However, in Gaza, "due to the sheer lack of food, water or shelter, extended families are themselves distressed and face challenges to immediately take care of another child as they themselves are struggling to cater for their own children and family", said Crickx.

Broadly, UNICEF terms separated children as those who are without their parents, while unaccompanied children are those who are separated and also without other relatives.

Crickx also said the mental health of children in Gaza was being severely affected by the offensive, and that a million children in the Gaza Strip require mental health support. Children in Gaza "present symptoms like extremely high levels of persistent anxiety, loss of appetite, they can't sleep, they have emotional outbursts or panic every time they hear the bombings," he explained.

Before the assault erupted, UNICEF estimated that more than 500,000 children in Gaza needed mental health and psycho-social support. Now, it believes that "almost all children are in need" of such help. "That's more than one million children," Crickx said.

According to the Palestinian health ministry, Israeli attacks have killed more than 27,100 people in Gaza since the war began on October 7, around 11,500 of them children.

More than 66,200 others have been wounded amid a severe lack of medical supplies and functioning healthcare facilities. Thousands more are missing and are under the rubble.

With Israeli ground troops encircling most of northern, central, and eastern Gaza, families have been forced to flee their homes several times since the war began. Many are now crammed in the southern Rafah governorate, which Israel has said is its next target of attack.

Many who fled their homes have been shot at and arrested. Those who make it to the south often have no contact with their relatives or caregivers in other parts of the enclave, especially during times of communication blackouts.

"Children don't have anything to do with this conflict. Yet they are suffering like no child should ever suffer," said Crickx. "No child should ever be exposed to the level of violence seen on October 7 – or to the level of violence that we have witnessed since then."

He called for a ceasefire so that UNICEF could conduct a proper count of children who are unaccompanied or separated, trace relatives, and deliver mental health support.

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