

UNICEF: Nine out of 10 children in Gaza lack food for growth

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Geneva, June 6 (RHC)-- About 90 percent of children in Gaza lack nutrition and face “severe” threats to their “survival, growth and development”, according to the United Nations children’s agency, UNICEF.

A report, published by UNICEF on Thursday, laid bare the “catastrophic impact” of Israel’s offensive on the enclave, which has caused the “collapse” of food and health systems, finding that one in 10 children survived on “two or fewer food groups per day” between December last year and April this year.

Describing “an appalling escalation in nutrition deprivation”, the report also highlighted that 65 percent of children were fed diets with “only one or no food groups” in February, a sixfold increase from the first half of December last year.

Israel says it places no limit on humanitarian supplies for civilians in Gaza and has blamed the United Nations for slow deliveries, saying its operations are inefficient. But with pockets of famine emerging in Gaza, with some children dying from malnutrition and dehydration, even Israel’s staunchest allies have increased pressure on it to do more to let in food.

The UNICEF report said that military action, which has destroyed food systems while imposing “severe restrictions on the import of commercial goods and humanitarian supplies”, had “deprived millions of the food, water and fuel they need”.

The report -- titled "Child Food Poverty: Nutrition deprivation in early childhood" -- examined food poverty among the world’s youngest in 100 countries. It warned that more than one in four children under the age of five live in “severe” food poverty, meaning more than 180 million face adverse impacts on their growth and development.

Of the children living in severe food poverty, 65 percent reside in just 20 countries. About 64 million affected children are in South Asia, while 59 million are in sub-Saharan Africa. Citing the situation in Gaza and in Somalia, where more than half of children experience food poverty caused by conflict and natural disasters, the report underlined the speed at which children were being placed “at risk of life-threatening malnutrition”.

“It is shocking in this day and age where we know what needs to be done,” Harriet Torlesse, one of the report’s lead writers, told the AFP news agency.

In order to meet the minimum dietary diversity for healthy development, children must consume foods from at least five of the eight food groups defined by a dietary diversity score used by UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO). These include breastmilk, eggs, dairy products, and meat, poultry and fish, among other groups.

Children who consume just two food groups per day are up to 50 percent more likely to experience severe forms of malnutrition, said UNICEF chief Catherine Russell in a statement accompanying the report.

Malnutrition can lead to emaciation, a state of being abnormally thin that can be fatal. Even if these children survive and grow up, “they certainly don’t thrive. So they do less well at school,” Torlesse explained. “When they’re adults, they find it harder to earn a decent income, and that turns the cycle of poverty from one generation to the next,” she said.

Worldwide, the agency noted “slow progress over the past decade” in addressing the crisis, and called for better social services and humanitarian aid for the most vulnerable children.

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