Press Release

Gaza: The IRC warns of alarming gap in care for unaccompanied and separated children in Gaza

- About 17,000 children in Gaza are estimated to be unaccompanied or separated from their parents according to UNICEF, but actual numbers may be much higher.
- New IRC research highlights the risk of family separation has increased dramatically in the past months, exacerbated by multiple rounds of displacements, arrests, Israeli evacuation orders and fatalities, with children found living alone in hospitals.
- Unaccompanied and separated children face high risks of child labor, exploitation, neglect, starvation, and mental health impacts.
- Caregivers and professionals shared that children in shock in Gaza are seeking comfort, clinging to others during loud sounds, wetting the bed, having nightmares, and are wanting to sleep under the bed to feel secure.
- Without access to support through protection and psychosocial activities or safe spaces, children who have suffered traumatic events are at risk of long-term developmental impacts.

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Amman, Jordan, August 16, 2024 — More than ten months into the escalation of hostilities in Gaza, the humanitarian crisis has reached unprecedented levels, with children bearing the brunt of the conflict. While at least 17,000 children are estimated to be unaccompanied or separated from their parents in Gaza, a new **IRC** assessment highlights that numbers may be much higher based on its work in other conflict zones.

people had previously been sheltering, causing mass displacement. Further displacements, arrests, detentions and Israeli evacuation orders across all of Gaza have driven further separation.

The report also emphasized that disruption of telecommunication and access challenges have hindered family reunification efforts.

Doctors reported to the IRC that children without surviving family members are being found in hospitals, essentially living there alone due to the lack of alternative care arrangements. A UN survey from April 2024 indicated that 41 per cent of families in Gaza were caring for children who were not their own since October—a rate more than eight times higher than typical emergency estimates of between three and five per cent. At the same time, UNICEF estimates that up to 19,000 children have been orphaned. While community members are stepping in to provide care, conditions remain grave, with displaced populations lacking basic resources, including food, water, adequate shelter and access to health care. This scarcity is heightening fears of child neglect, particularly amid recent displacements, as families may be forced to prioritize their own children over others due to limited space and resources.

The IRC calls for an urgent scale up in support for unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), including diversified care options to meet the high level of need. Although humanitarian agencies have launched interventions to prevent family separations and created systems to identify and document UASC, these processes have been slow and difficult due to restrictions on access, challenges in humanitarian response and security constraints.

It is also crucial to prioritise support for UASC through psychosocial support activities and the creation of safe spaces. Ongoing toxic stress from violence and displacement can lead to long-term health challenges for children. Without support through psychosocial activities or safe spaces for children, there is a significant risk of long-term developmental impacts, including on brain development. The urgency of the situation calls for immediate international support and intervention to mitigate these long-term impacts and support the resilience and recovery of Palestinian children.

the only way to fully protect Palestinian lives, secure the release of hostages taken from Israel by Hamas and other armed groups on October 7th, and safely scale-up humanitarian assistance and service delivery. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) is calling for all parties to agree to an immediate and lasting ceasefire as envisaged by UN Security Council Resolution 2735.

Ulrike Julia Wendt, IRC's Emergency Child Protection Coordinator, says:

"The situation for children in Gaza is extremely dire. Children are being killed, injured or separated from their families in this conflict. The ongoing conflict puts children's health and well-being at severe risk.

"Children who are abandoned or separated from their families, as well as orphans, face particularly high risks of child labor, exploitation, neglect and mental health issues. Their access to critical resources for survival is also severely reduced. A psychologist I spoke to in Gaza last month mentioned many cases of children in shock, often seeking comfort and clinging to adults when they hear loud sounds. Some children have also started bed-wetting, having nightmares, and asking to sleep under the bed to feel more secure. We do not know how girls who go out to get money are obtaining it, and domestic violence, including sexual violence, is on the rise.

"Children are supposed to be in school, but instead, you see them at the bakery, carrying very heavy jerry cans that are sometimes as tall as they are. Many children are without shoes and wear dirty clothes. While it is heartening to sometimes see some children laughing and dancing to music, this is not their everyday reality given the conditions in which they live. It is crucial to create some sort of safe spaces for children, even though there is actually no safe space in Gaza. Children are resilient and can recover, but they urgently need supportive conditions and a protective environment to do so."

END

- The executive summary of the IRC's protection report on unaccompanied and separated children can be accessed **here**.

- In Gaza, the IRC is directly delivering water, sanitation, and hygiene services, and has launched nutrition, and child protection programming. With partners, the IRC is providing emergency and life-saving medical care, including direct medical care, in Gaza's few remaining operational hospitals. IRC health partners are also procuring and distributing medical supplies and pharmaceuticals. In addition to supporting the health sector, the IRC is working with partners to provide psychosocial support, protection, and early childhood development activities, which are integrated with water, sanitation and hygiene and nutrition messaging.

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The International Rescue Committee responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises, helping to restore health, safety, education, economic wellbeing, and power to people devastated by conflict and disaster. Founded in 1933 at the call of Albert Einstein, the IRC works in more than 40 countries and in 28 U.S. cities helping people to survive, reclaim control of their future, and strengthen their communities. Learn more at **www.rescue.org** and follow the IRC on **Instagram**, **Twitter**, **TikTok** and **Facebook**.

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