SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES

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“They are exhausted, and you can feel their sadness”

After more than 100 days of war in Gaza, hundreds of children find themselves alone amid the chaos, left without parents, immediate relatives or any caregivers that could protect and support them.

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killed in airstrikes are now struggling to provide for them. Euro-Med Monitor estimates that up to 25,000 children in the Gaza Strip have lost one or both parents. Thousands of them are cared for by extended family.

Many people come to the SOS Children's Village in Rafah asking that the children be taken in.

"We have a huge number of children being taken care of by their relatives," said a senior staff member reached at the village. "In the beginning it was something good, but now what is happening is that the extended family members start to push these children out of their care because they are not able to cover their essential needs, because in all of Gaza, people are suffering."

SOS Children's Villages in Palestine intends to provide support to these families, such as cash and other necessities, with the hope that these extended family members will be able to keep caring for the children.

More than 10,000 children killed

The sustained bombing of the Gaza Strip has led to the largest mass displacement of Palestinians since 1948, according to the United Nations. Nearly, the entire population of more than 2 million people is now in and around Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, where SOS Children's Villages has operated since 2000.

More than 25,000 civilians have been killed by the airstrikes, of which more than 10,000 are children, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health.

Outside the Children's Village, thousands of people are walking around in a constant search for food and water, most receiving one meal per day from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East or UNWRA. People live in inhumane conditions, with disease spreading and the risk of famine growing.

"They start from early morning, you know, at 3 a.m. or 4 a.m., going to the markets in search of water, essential foods; going to get assistance from the United Nations," said the staff member.

Children in Gaza join the adults in the search for food and to fill up water containers. "No one takes care of them," the staff member said. "They are exhausted, and you can feel their

children living there.

SOS Children's Villages, along with a partner agency, is working to identify an additional 55 children who have lost parental care or been separated from their family members to be placed in the village. So far, five children – all under the age of 10 - have arrived.

More children expected to arrive shortly

"The five children came to the village because they lost all their family members, all of them, and they now are traumatized," the staff member said. "There is one girl who is four years old. She is not talking at all. We are doing our best to provide the needed help for their nutrition, for their mental health, for them to be able to cope with what they are facing.

"Some of the children were wounded in airstrikes, with burns over most of their bodies. They were treated by one of the doctors from the hospital. Now they are in good health. They are not suffering anymore."

"We expect more and more children to arrive in the coming days. We are coordinating with many stakeholders to help us identify unaccompanied and separated children because we are sure that there are many. Some of them are staying in hospitals, some in shelters, some may be in the streets among the IDPs. We are searching for them."

With around 25,000 civilians killed, the staff member in Rafah estimates that there are "hundreds" of children in immediate need of alternative care. However, it is impossible to conduct an accurate assessment. SOS Children's Villages is also trying to work with partners to trace the families of children. But this will be challenge. In the case of the four-year-old girl they took in, they do not know her name.

**Names of staff are not being revealed out of safety concerns*

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of SOS Children's Villages

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