

Remarks

# UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell's remarks at the UN Security Council briefing on the protection of children in Gaza

*As delivered*

22 November 2023



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**NEW YORK, November 22, 2023** – “Excellencies,

“Thank you to Ambassador Nusseibeh, Ambassador Zhang Jun, and Ambassador Frazier for bringing us together to speak about the worsening situation for children in the State of Palestine and Israel.

“I would also like to thank this Council for its adoption of Resolution 2712, a text that acknowledges the disproportionate impact of this war on children, by demanding that parties to the conflict afford children with the special protection they are entitled to under international law.

“Critically, this resolution calls for extended humanitarian pauses and corridors in Gaza ... which I hope will be urgently implemented, so that humanitarian partners can reach civilians in need – especially children. UNICEF also welcomes the limited ceasefire agreement. We are positioned to quickly scale up the delivery of desperately needed humanitarian aid in Gaza but, of course, more resources are needed to meet ever growing needs.

“But this is far from enough: the war must be brought to an end and the killing and maiming of children must stop immediately.

“Excellencies, before briefing you in more detail on the situation in Gaza, I would like to draw your attention to the plight of children in Israel and the West Bank.

“Since October 7<sup>th</sup>, 35 Israeli children have reportedly been killed, while more than 30 are being held hostage in Gaza. Like the Secretary-General has said, the agreement to release hostages is welcomed but much more needs to be done. UNICEF will continue to call on parties to safely release all abducted children.

“Last week, UNICEF’s Deputy Executive Director traveled to Israel where he met with families of the child hostages. They shared their anguish and deepening fear over the safety of their children.

“I had planned to travel to Israel and the West Bank last week as well, but I was advised by doctors to postpone my visit after sustaining injuries in a car crash en route to Rafah.

“Our Deputy Executive Director visited the West Bank to assess the deteriorating security and humanitarian conditions there. Over the past six weeks, 56 Palestinian children have been killed, while scores have been displaced from their homes. We estimate that 450,000 children in the West Bank need humanitarian assistance. UNICEF and its partners are providing mental health and protection support, water and sanitation services, and remedial education for 280,000 children in the West Bank.

“Turning to Gaza, I have just returned from a visit to the south of the territory where I was able to meet with children, their families, and with UNICEF staff on the ground. I am haunted by what I saw and heard.

“When I visited the Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis, it was teeming with people. In addition to the patients and medical staff, the hospital is sheltering thousands of internally displaced people. They are sleeping on blankets, along corridors and in the hospital’s common areas.

“While I was there, I spoke with a 16-year-old girl Ivina in her hospital bed. She was badly

injured when her neighborhood was bombed, and the doctors told her she will never walk again. In the hospital's neonatal ward, I saw tiny babies clinging to life in incubators, as doctors worried how they could keep the machines running without fuel.

"During my time in Khan Yunis, I also spoke with a UNICEF staff member who, despite losing 17 members of her own extended family, is working heroically to provide children and families in Gaza with access to safe water and sanitation.

"As a mother of four, she is one of countless parents in Gaza in constant fear for her family. Given the terrible toll this war has exacted on Gaza's children, their fear is well founded.

"More than 5,300 Palestinian children have been reportedly killed in just 46 days – that is over 115 a day, every day, for weeks and weeks. Based on these figures, children account for forty per cent of the deaths in Gaza. This is unprecedented. In other words, today, the Gaza Strip is the most dangerous place in the world to be a child.

"We are also receiving reports that more than 1,200 children remain under the rubble of bombed out buildings or are otherwise unaccounted for.

"Of note, the number of deaths in the present crisis has far surpassed the total number of deaths during previous escalations. For comparison, a total of 1,653 children were verified as killed in 17 years of monitoring and reporting of grave violations between 2005 and 2022.

"Children who manage to survive the war are likely to see their lives irrevocably altered through repeated exposure to traumatic events. The violence and upheaval around them can induce toxic stress that interferes with their physical and cognitive development. Even before this latest escalation, more than 540,000 children in Gaza – half of its entire child population – were identified as needing mental health and psychosocial support.

"Today, well over 1.7 million people in Gaza, half of whom are children, are displaced.

"We are particularly concerned by reports of increasing numbers of displaced children who have been separated from their families along evacuation corridors to the south, or who are otherwise arriving unaccompanied to hospitals for medical care. These children are especially vulnerable, and they urgently need to be identified, provided with temporary care, and given access to family tracing and reunification services.

"In addition to bombs, rockets, and gunfire, Gaza's children are at extreme risk from catastrophic living conditions. One million children – or really all children inside the territory – are now food insecure; facing what could soon become a catastrophic nutrition crisis.

"We project that over the next few months, child wasting, the most life-threatening form of malnutrition in children, could increase by nearly 30 per cent in Gaza.

"Meanwhile, water production capacity has plummeted to just five per cent of its normal output, with families and children relying on three liters or less of water per person per day for drinking, cooking, and hygiene. At the same time, water pumping, desalination and wastewater treatment have all ceased to function because of the lack of fuel. And sanitation services have collapsed.

"These conditions are leading to disease outbreaks which could be life-threatening for vulnerable groups like newborns, children, and women – especially those who are malnourished. We are seeing cases of diarrheal and respiratory infections in children under five. We anticipate that the situation could worsen as the colder winter weather starts to set in.

"The public health risks in Gaza are compounded by the virtual shutdown of the health care system. More than two-thirds of hospitals are no longer functioning because of the lack of fuel and water, or because they sustained catastrophic damage in attacks. Moreover, WHO estimates that at least 16 health workers have been killed and 38 injured while on duty.

"Hospital patients are being injured and killed or are dying from the lack of medicine and care. Last week, UNICEF was part of an inter-agency mission that relocated 31 babies from Al-Shifa hospital to the Emirati hospital in the south of the Gaza Strip. Twenty-eight of those babies are now receiving care in Egypt.

"Hospitals should never be attacked or used by combatants. And with thousands of displaced people sheltering in Gaza's health facilities, I cannot emphasize this point enough.

"We are also seeing devastating attacks on schools, with close to 90 per cent of all school buildings sustaining damage. Nearly 80 per cent of the remaining school facilities are being used as shelters for internally displaced people. But even these spaces, where children and families have sought safety after fleeing their homes, have come under attack.

"This past weekend, strikes on two schools, including UNRWA's Al-Fakhura school which was sheltering displaced people, reportedly killed at least 24 people. UNICEF condemns all attacks on schools.

"Across the State of Palestine and Israel, parties to the conflict are blatantly committing grave violations against children – including killing, maiming, abductions, attacks on schools and hospitals, and the denial of humanitarian access.

"But in Gaza, the effects of the violence perpetrated on children have been catastrophic, indiscriminate and disproportionate. And when the war ends, the contamination by explosive remnants of war will be unprecedented, with potentially tens of thousands of remnants scattered across Gaza and beyond – a lethal threat to children that could last for decades.

"Inside Gaza, the war has also caused the largest ever loss of life for UN personnel, with more than 100 UNRWA staff killed. And in recent days, a WHO colleague was killed along with her 6-month-old baby, her husband and her two brothers.

"Excellencies, for children to survive, for humanitarian workers to stay and effectively deliver, humanitarian pauses are simply not enough. UNICEF is calling for an urgent humanitarian ceasefire to immediately put a stop to this carnage.

"We are concerned that further military escalation in the south of Gaza would exponentially worsen the humanitarian situation there, causing additional displacement, and squeezing the civilian population into an even smaller area. Attacks on the south must be avoided.

"UNICEF is strongly opposed to the establishment of so-called 'safe zones.' No place is safe in the Gaza Strip. And the proposed zones do not have the infrastructure or protection measures in place to meet the needs of such large numbers of civilians.

"We also reiterate our call on the parties to immediately and fully respect international humanitarian and human rights law, including the principles of necessity, distinction, precaution and proportionality.

"We ask them to go beyond what the law requires – to protect children and the civilian infrastructure they rely on, and to immediately, and unconditionally, release all civilian hostages held in the Gaza Strip, especially children.

"We call on the parties to abide by Resolution 2712, and to provide safe and unrestricted humanitarian access to and within the Gaza Strip, including in the north. Parties must allow the immediate entry of life sustaining supplies, including fuel, that are needed for trucking, water desalination, water pumping and flour production. We must be permitted to bring in essential WASH supplies, tarpaulins, tents and poles.

"We also call on the parties to ensure the voluntary movement and safe passage for all civilians seeking emergency shelter and a safe place to stay, to reopen, repair and augment the capacity of all water lines into the Gaza Strip, and to ensure that the water is safe and not contaminated.

"Excellencies, the true cost of this latest war in Palestine and Israel will be measured in children's lives – those lost to the violence and those forever changed by it. Without an end to the fighting and full humanitarian access, the cost will continue to grow exponentially.

"The destruction of Gaza and killing of civilians will not bring peace or safety to the region. The people of this region deserve peace. Only a negotiated political solution – one that prioritizes the rights and wellbeing of this and future generations of Israeli and Palestinian children – can ensure that.

"I urge the parties to heed this call, starting with a humanitarian ceasefire as the first step on the path to lasting peace. And I urge you, as Members of the Security Council, to do everything in your power to end this catastrophe for children.

"Thank you."

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