

Gaza Crisis: One Year Later

Children and Families Continue to Struggle to Rebuild their Lives



One year after Operation Cast Lead began, the children of Gaza continue to face enormous challenges as their families struggle to rebuild their lives.

Half of Gaza's population is under 18 years of age, and the 750,000 children living there comprise the majority of those most affected by last year's hostilities.

- Thousands of children are still displaced from their homes and living in cramped conditions in makeshift structures or the homes of relatives. They have lost all that is familiar to them, including clothes, toys, school books and a secure environment.
- Children are attending overcrowded schools, many running multiple shifts, leading to a decline in education quality.
- Many of Gaza's children have not seen a doctor or nurse during the past year.
- More than half of families do not have regular access to clean water, increasing health threats to children, especially the very young.

Save the Children has worked throughout the year to help children recover from the conflict and its aftermath. The agency has reached more than 358,300 people through a variety of programs, including over 200,600 children.

Background

One year ago — on December 27, 2008 — conflict erupted in and around Gaza. By January 18, when unilateral cessations of violence were declared, 1,393 Palestinians, 347 of them children, and thirteen Israelis, including three civilians, had been killed, according to the latest estimates submitted to the U.N. Homes, schools and buildings in Gaza were destroyed. Families were left without shelter during the harsh winter, and children lost access to education. Hospitals were flooded with injured people and, as fuel, food and water dwindled, more children's lives were put at risk.

While the fighting raged, Save the Children responded quickly to meet children's immediate needs. The agency provided food, clean water and basic items to help vulnerable families who had fled their homes for refuge elsewhere. In the most affected communities, staff set up safe water points, created child-friendly spaces for children, expanded maternal and child health care, and distributed essential non-food items. Save the Children's programs assisted thousands of children

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—Shayma, Age 13

— many of whom had lost all that was safe and familiar to them in the destruction.

Save the Children's staff members faced the same dangers and deprivations as many other Gazans. They lacked food and water, went without electricity and protection from the winter cold, and spent sleepless nights worrying for the safety of their loved ones. Some staff members saw their homes destroyed. Some, tragically, lost family members.



Shayma, 13, walks to school through a neighborhood that has yet to rebuild following the conflict.

The three weeks of fighting compounded an ongoing humanitarian crisis for children and families in Gaza, where social services and infrastructure had deteriorated over the months preceding the crisis. Food, clean water, electricity and fuel were already in short supply. Unemployment and under-employment meant most parents had not the means to provide for their children.

Distributing essential emergency items

When the fighting began, many families fled their homes to shelters and relatives' houses, abandoning their belongings. Buildings were destroyed, and families were unable to return home. They were left without food and the essential items they needed to stay warm and healthy. In January and February 2009, Save the Children delivered food parcels to more than 22,600 children and adults. In addition, Save the Children distributed essential household items including bedding, blankets, pots and pans, hygiene kits including items such as soap and toothbrushes, plastic mats and baby kits with diapers and powder. Essential non-food items have reached over 158,000 people, including over 88,000 children.

Protecting children from harm

Following the conflict, Save the Children sought to provide a safe, secure environment for Gaza's children, many of whom had witnessed violence first hand and had experienced the loss of friends and family members. With rubble and broken glass filling the streets, children were left with nowhere safe to play. Save the Children began setting up child-friendly spaces to give children a structured environment to play together, receive support, and have a nutritious meal or snack. Recognizing that their children are safe and protected,

parents are able to have time to rebuild their lives. Since January, Save the Children has worked with 34 partner organizations to establish 33 child-friendly spaces throughout Gaza. An average 1,400 children have attended Save the Children's child-friendly spaces each week. Nearly 30 children have been referred for additional support. In addition, Save the Children's community-based child protection project, designed to strengthen the mechanisms for community-based child protection and organize child-protection committees, is providing a protective environment for minors, ensuring that their rights are not violated and helping them continue their education. The program will assist more than 4,000 young people, 1,800 parents and will support 70 members of child-protection committees. It will continue through 2010.

Helping children return to school

Education is critical to children's long-term intellectual and emotional development, and schools can offer a sense of normalcy to children, protect them from dangerous environments and provide an opportunity to teach children life skills that will help them recover from a crisis. In Gaza, Save the Children has been training teachers to better support children affected by the conflict, engage children in the learning process, and plan for future emergencies. In partnership with 20 local preschools, Save the Children has held mother- and parent-awareness sessions to explain the benefits of education for children and to encourage parents to send their children to school. The agency also has distributed 2,000 copies of educational materials to pre- and primary schools. Since the start of June 2009, Save the Children has arranged educational summer games for preschool children and has provided toys and first aid kits to

Displacement takes its toll on children

One year ago, thousands of Gazan children witnessed the destruction of their familiar world and had their lives turned upside-down as their families fled for safety. Today, many are still living in temporary quarters, struggling to keep up with school and hoping for improvement in their family's life.

Shayma, 13, is the youngest daughter and one of seven children in the Khader family. Her family's home in the north of Gaza was destroyed in the fighting. Today the 7th grader, her siblings and parents live in a makeshift structure fabricated from the rubble of their previous residence. They live in cramped quarters and deal with regular water shortages.

"Before the offensive I used to have my own room. I had pictures of Barbie in all corners of my room. Now I'm sleeping with all my three sisters and three brothers in the same area," she says. "When my father told us that the home was destroyed, I just told myself, no more Barbie! I also remember the big salon we had, where my brothers and sisters played. This is the thing I'm missing now."

Shayma, who wants to be a doctor when she grows up, says her school work is suffering because she does not feel comfortable where they now live.

"I don't feel home at all. I stopped doing all the things I like, such as drawing, playing. I don't even like watching TV now," she says. "My academic achievement is much worse than before the offensive. I was getting very good marks but now I'm not that good at all, and I'm afraid that now I won't be able to be a doctor."

Like Shayma, Bilal, 15, also lost his home in the conflict. His school was damaged, and his family's strawberry farm and all their belongings were destroyed. Today he, his 14 siblings and his mother, a widow of seven years, live in three tents near Beit Lahia, in the north of Gaza.

Bilal's mother, Amna, says her children often refuse to go to school because they are embarrassed of the few clothes they have to wear. Her children are losing hope.

"Why should I know what I want to be when I grow up?," Bilal responds when asked about his future. "It is nonsense if I say I want to be a doctor. Would this be possible for someone who's living in a tent and doesn't have clothes to wear? What I know that instead of being ready to play during my weekend, I wake up earlier than school days to prepare the donkey, the cart and the vegetables to go to the market with my mother."

He adds: "Everything was turned upside-down in my life, I have no more dreams. I just want to feel like I am living in a home again."

schools. More than 16,000 parents, teachers and principals and more than 9,000 children have benefited from our education programs. In addition, Save the Children has established 16 safe areas for emergency education in four areas most affected by the conflict. About 2,000 boys and girls, ages 10–14, regularly participate in educational and recreational activities at the safe areas; they also are provided with a daily meal. The program provides remedial education and support for children so that they do not miss out on critical learning time and remain in school.

Keeping children and mothers healthy

Due to heavy restrictions on imports into Gaza, medical supplies and equipment are in short supply — putting young children and expecting and new mothers, particularly, at risk. Save the Children has been supporting mothers and their children through community-based health care, including prenatal care, home visits to women who have recently given

birth, and medical checks for them and their newborn babies. The agency has conducted nutrition assessments to identify families who urgently need supplementary food, and provided vitamin supplements to children under 5. Staff members have distributed health education materials and conducted health screenings of children. Save the Children and partner organizations reach a population of over 66,000 people with maternal and child health care.

Providing clean water and improving sanitation

In Gaza deteriorating infrastructure and recent damage from the conflict in December 2008 and January 2009 have reduced the availability of clean water. Three in every five families in Gaza City receive running water at their homes just once every 3–4 days. Unclean water poses a huge risk to children's health. Children under age 5 are particularly vulnerable to waterborne diseases that can cause diarrhea — one of the

biggest killers of young children worldwide. Save the Children has been addressing this urgent need by installing desalination units in 36 preschools, reaching more than 6,500 students. The agency replaced more than 1,000 damaged household water tanks and pumps, as well as repaired sewage connections to 40 households. In addition Save the Children has replaced a damaged sewage main line and water main line, assisting more than 49,500 people, and has conducted awareness-raising campaigns to make sure families understand the importance of clean water, the risks that dirty water creates, and how to treat water to protect themselves from illness. The agency's emergency water and sanitation programs have reached more than 52,700 people.

Promoting economic recovery

During the conflict, along with the destruction of homes and schools, agricultural land and factories were extensively damaged. Livelihoods options for farmers, herders and fishermen continue to be severely restricted due to the border closure, sporadic conflict and lack of access to land and sea. Ensuring economic viability is the foundation of a safe and secure household for children. Save the Children has responded to the economic needs of vulnerable families by providing cash safety nets and cash-for-work projects. Immediately following the end of hostilities, cash safety nets were provided to more than 280 extremely needy families. Cash-for-work activities have been established to provide work for laborers desperate for a job. These activities also benefit communities through the laying of water pipes, cleaning roads and parks, and re-planting farms where crops were damaged during the conflict. Cash-for-work activities have helped more than 800 laborers. In total, livelihoods activities have directly benefitted more than 1,500 men and women.

Supporting families

Working with UNICEF, Save the Children is operating 25 family centers, which provide holistic support to vulnerable children and their families and caregivers. Programs provide psychosocial support to help people cope with stressors at home or work; remedial education, child-protection services; early childhood health advice; and recreation activities. Protection programs include education on unexploded ordinance.



Bilal, 15, lives with his mother, a widow, and 14 siblings in three tents near Beit Lahia, in the north of Gaza.

Ongoing programs to assist children

Save the Children is one of the largest international nongovernmental organizations working in Gaza, where the agency has more than 30 years of experience providing critical assistance to children and families. Given the extraordinary challenges that children still face every day — including threats to their health, well-being, protection, rights and access to education — Save the Children will continue its work to help improve the lives and future of Gazan infants, children and young people. Much-needed programs in the areas of microfinance, water and sanitation, health, education, and protection will continue over the coming months and years. The agency also plans to distribute non-food household and other items into 2010.

Photos page 2, 4: Paolo Pellegrin/Magnum for Save the Children

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