



Children demand answers and we must deliver now

Jerusalem, 6 February 2009 – “Despite the Gaza ceasefires, children continue to suffer and remain in a precarious state of insecurity”, stated Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, after her four-day visit to the occupied Palestinian territory and southern Israel. She was in the region to assess first hand the situation of children.

In Gaza, where 56% of the population is below 18 years old, grave violations against children were committed such as killing and maiming, and denial of humanitarian access. During the recent hostilities, there were no safe spaces for children and the crossings out of Gaza were, and remain, virtually sealed.

One third of Palestinian casualties are reported to be children. Many children have witnessed unspeakable violence against their family members and are severely distressed. The extensive destruction to homes, hospitals, schools and power, water and sanitation networks also has a devastating impact on children. The damage or destruction of hospitals and schools including the American International School, Palestinian Authority-administered, and UNRWA schools - considered protected spaces -- was particularly shocking. “Reconstructing the schools and ensuring that children can go back to their classrooms and feel secure again is essential to their recovery,” said Ms. Coomaraswamy.

“There is no doubt that children live in constant fear of missile attacks in Southern Israel. The need for psycho-social support has increased recently,” she said on her visit to Ashkelon. “The indiscriminate firing of rockets into civilian areas is clearly a grave violation of international humanitarian law and should not be neglected simply because they are lower in scale”, she added. The Special Representative urged Hamas and other affiliated groups to immediately stop the rocket attacks on Israel, stating that this only feeds the cycle of violence.

In both Gaza and southern Israel, children expressed anger and despair as a manifestation of their desire for accountability. It is imperative that independent and impartial investigations are conducted and justice is done. The lack of accountability only contributes to a sense of impunity. “The children want answers and the international community must deliver”, declared the Special Representative.

Children in Gaza are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, including the restoration of basic services and the immediate reconstruction of schools and hospitals. “Rehabilitation services for the disabled and psycho-social support programs for the tens of thousands in distress are critical. Education is a basic right, an emergency need and a development imperative. It must be prioritized in any emergency response,” said the Special Representative.

Ms. Coomaraswamy reiterated calls by the international community for Israel to open all crossings for regular, sufficient and facilitated humanitarian access and said the amount and kinds of supplies allowed into Gaza must be significantly expanded for any real improvement to occur. The Special Representative emphasized that humanitarian agencies must not be hampered in assisting the population and their workers authorized easy access into Gaza. The Special Representative stated that Hamas must respect that humanitarian aid cannot be diverted.

“Even though they bear the brunt of the conflict, children remain strong advocates for peace,” said Ms. Coomaraswamy. “Every child has the right to live in safety and security. Children from the region have suffered enough. They deserve a better future,” she concluded.

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