



Danger everywhere: A child is back helping in the fields after the cessation of the 22-day Israeli military operations, which left behind many unexploded ordnance.



Slight relief: Streets are the playground for the Gazan children.

Surviving the trauma of war



REPORTING FROM
GAZA

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There is a lot that the people in Gaza need in order to rebuild their shattered lives. One is for the borders to be opened to allow a free flow of the basic goods they desperately need.

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AMAL is afraid to go back to school. The 11-year-old is afraid of her desk, her classroom and even her textbooks. Her school is next to the Intelligence Headquarters. She was in school on Dec 27 (the first day of the Israeli attacks) doing her exams when Israeli planes dropped a huge bomb on the Intelligence Headquarters.

"We could hear that bomb all over Gaza City. Amal saw it through her classroom window," said Osama Damo, the documentation communications officer from Save The Children, a British-based NGO.

Amal's house is just metres from the school but now she won't walk there on her own either. Her father has to take her.

Fidah is 17 and comes from a huge family of 10 brothers and 10 sisters. Both her parents have no work and used to depend on charities to get by. But before Dec 27, at least they had their own home.



School a target, too: A gaping hole from tank fire can be seen in this picture of a school in Gaza. — SHAHANAAZ HABIB / The Star

He said that although she looked fine, she started wetting the bed at

So many children now suffer from nightmares and sleeping disorders.

"We are also concerned about children who had to stay with bod-

them," he said.

Last week, two children were killed instantly in the east of Gaza City when they picked up an unexploded ammunition.

He said there is no local expertise in Gaza and the ICRC is bringing in two weapons experts to gauge the scale and type of ammunition left behind, and infestation of territory.

What is more painful is that even before the recent Israeli attacks, Gaza had already been stressed to the limit from a one-and-a-half year-long economic embargo as punishment from their two neighbouring countries (Israel and Egypt) for voting for Hamas. This had left 50,000 children in Gaza malnourished even before the recent Israeli attacks.

Even now, after the 22-day military operation which left a trail of destruction, death and suffering, Israel and Egypt are still refusing to open the borders to allow a free flow of basic goods into Gaza. Organisations like Save The Children are having a hard time bringing in humanitarian supplies.

"We have a lot of supplies waiting to be distributed to the people but

A bomb in early January totally flattened her home. She was lucky to make it out alive. She spent the first night in a public park, the second out on the street, and the third in a hospital before finally being taken to a shelter.

"I don't want to go to school because I have nothing to wear. I have no uniform, no books, no schoolbag, no textbooks, no money. So why should I go to school?" she asked.

Being a teenager, Fidah had already suffered the embarrassment of being poor in front of her classmates in the past, but now she is even more embarrassed as she is displaced and has no home to go back to.

Osama said 400,000 people have been displaced during the 22-day Israeli military operation. Of this, 56% or 224,000 are children!

Gaza is a densely-populated tiny strip of land (45km long and six to 12km wide). Being so small, many homes and schools are located near ministries, police stations and offices that Israel targeted.

So, most children are still traumatised as they witnessed the bombings themselves especially on the first day when they were at school.

Mahmoud Abu Rahma's 10-year-old daughter is one of them. "She told me she saw a ball of fire carrying human flesh, bodies and rubble," said the training, communications and international relations officer from the Al-Mezab Centre for Human Rights in Gaza City.

night and would not go to the bathroom unless accompanied.

"On the fourth day of the Israeli strike, there was a bombardment of a clinic after midnight near our building and this daughter was shivering on my lap for 25 minutes non-stop," he said.

His two other children, an 11-year-old son and a six-year old daughter, also started wetting their beds during the bombings.

"Many of us parents had to sleep in wet beds with the kids as the children needed physical contact even when they slept to make them feel safer," he said.

Atmosphere of terror

It was also cold and very dark. For the first two weeks of the attacks, many homes were without electricity. In the cold of winter, people – including children, of course – had to endure freezing temperatures as the windows of their homes were either broken or had to be kept open to avoid being shattered by the impact of the bombs.

The bombs came day and night and were particularly intensive at night. This has resulted in nights becoming insecure for the children.

"It was not even safe for the parents so imagine what it was like for the children. A child gets his sense of protection from his father and mother but if the parents themselves do not feel protected, it is difficult on the child," said Osama.

Mahmoud believes Israel is deliberately creating an atmosphere of terror as its planes and drones were in the sky all the time and everyone could hear them.

"We could hear the F-16s coming at very high speeds and low latitudes and bombarding locations with very heavy missiles.

"I couldn't understand why places like the Arafat Police Academy were bombarded from the air about 10 times. It was already destroyed in the first bombardment. Other security compounds and the prison were pounded over and over again.

"We couldn't understand this except it was for the purpose of terrorisation. People had to feel scared and they were. In Gaza there was no safe place to go.

"It was so difficult to explain to children why other children are being killed and why death is so imminent all the time; and not be able to tell them this would end soon," he said.

The Al-Mezab Centre for Human Rights estimates that a total of 1,100 children have been killed or maimed (300 killed, 800 maimed) in the 22-day Israeli strike.

"The right to life and the integrity of children have been extremely violated. We have reports of children being wilfully killed by soldiers sometimes at close range and of families with children who were trying to escape neighbourhoods that were being bombed who were hit.

ies of their dead parents for days. Children here have been traumatised in so many ways.

"I seriously doubt the children will forget and forgive what happened," said Mahmoud.

Dangerous playground

And the danger is still not over for them. Iyad Nasr from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said that before one can even start talking about the psychological impact on the kids, the primary concern still is their physical safety after the military operations stopped.

The 22-day extensive military operation left lots of unexploded ordnance behind - some in residential areas where homes were destroyed.

Unlike other children in the world, Iyad said, the children of Gaza have no playgrounds and not enough space to play at home.

"So their playground and garden are the streets. All they see and all they have is their place of wonderment. Residential areas and schools were hit and after the schools reopened, the children are passing through these places where military operations had taken place.

"You don't know what the kids are going to find in the destroyed house of their neighbour or what they are going dig up in the rubble. You just don't know what kind of surprises are waiting there for

to be distributed to the people but they are stuck because of the closed borders. We are not calling for an exceptional opening of the border - just a normal and complete one," said Osama.

It is also hard for families to fix their broken homes. There are no construction materials in Gaza. There is no glass to be bought to fix broken windows and no plastic sheets either to board up windows temporarily against the winter chill - further exposing children to possible respiratory diseases and infections.

"If you do find some plastic sheets, you should see how much they cost! People can't afford that," said ICRC's Iyad.

He said even before the attacks, the closed borders were depleting resources and that infrastructure was collapsing and already very fragile.

"The military operation accelerated the scale of deterioration until it reached this humanitarian crisis," he said. "You go to the streets and see life is going on. People can't afford not to go back to work. But what you are seeing is 'functional-ity'. It's absolutely not normal.

"What we witness today is a state of tension, worry and alertness. It only takes one small rumour and the whole place goes into paralysis. The scar, the trauma is still there.

"People are going back because they have no other choice. They have to find a way out of the rubble to continue living."

Just like the children...