

# Disability and Explosive Remnants of War in Gaza



By Alaa Khatib and Silvester Kasozi

The prolonged conflict in the Palestinian territories has gravely jeopardized the lives of the Palestinian people, especially the people living in the Gaza Strip, which has been affected by several subsequent conflicts, the most recent of which occurred in 2014. Thousands of people were injured or lost their lives during the aggression, and many more afterwards due to explosive remnants of war (ERW). It is estimated that 13.6 percent of the persons injured will suffer from permanent disabilities, according to “Healing the Wounds,” a report issued by Handicap International (HI) in 2015.<sup>i</sup> Another study found that 24 percent of the surveyed population in Gaza reported at least one indicator of disability (difficulty in hearing, seeing, speaking, moving, understanding, learning, managing emotions, taking care of self, interacting with others).<sup>ii</sup> Conflict situations make the already-complex conditions of persons with disabilities even worse. The research team of the Disability Representative Bodies Network (DRBN)<sup>iii</sup> reported in September 2014 that 2,204 persons with disabilities were forcefully displaced during the crisis, and 11 institutions that address the needs of persons with disabilities in the Gaza Strip were destroyed, either partially or completely, further curtailing access to much-needed specialized services. The rebuilding of these facilities remains incomplete, being hampered by difficulties in obtaining the required materials. Gaza, meanwhile, is also still highly contaminated by ERW, which will likely result in a significant increase in the prevalence of disability in Gaza due to exposure.

United Nations observers report that Gaza was hit by over 70,000 explosive ordnances during the 50 days of conflict between Israel and Palestinian factions in Gaza (July–August 2014). According to the United Nations Mine Action Services (UNMAS), it is estimated that at least 10 percent of these ordnances failed to explode, which means that from this particular conflict more than 7,000 ERW are estimated to have remained in the Gaza Strip. By January 2016, 30 percent of these had been removed, about 2,100 items, and since the beginning of 2016, an additional 3,368 items have been diffused. However, due to hampered reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts, numerous suspected explosives remain concealed and/or inaccessible throughout Gaza, either among the rubble of destroyed structures or buried below the surface in open areas. Furthermore, it is likely that many concealed ERW remain buried from previous conflicts, whereas the intermittent nature of hostilities not only frequently prevents assessment but likely also increases the numbers of unexploded devices, ensuring a proliferation of explosive ordnances that are unaccounted for

The January 2016 Gaza Situation Report of UNRWA notes that since the 2014 war, 16 people were killed and 90 wounded, including 38 children, several of whom were subject to permanent impairments and disability due to contact with unexploded remnants of war.

in contamination figures dating from 2014. Therefore, the exact number of ERW buried in open areas or hidden in the rubble remains elusive. They pose a direct threat to the population of Gaza, particularly to children who venture into unknown territory to play and to adults who need to work on contaminated agricultural land. Threats include, but are not limited to death, injury, and physical and sensorial disabilities.

*Risk education for children on the streets of Gaza.*



According to a report issued in 2011 by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, approximately 7 percent of Palestinians have disabilities. This means that an estimated 127,120 persons of the 1.8 million inhabitants in Gaza have disabilities. As persons with disabilities in Gaza are still largely looked upon from a charitable and medical perspective, public policies and programs continuously fail to address their issues adequately. Authorities tend to consider them recipients – rather than participants

The fact that most people in Gaza now know what to do and what not to do when they find explosive remnants of war is testament to the successful contribution of risk education in saving lives and preventing injury and disability.

*Risk education for persons with disabilities.*



– in development processes and humanitarian responses, and consequently they are left out of decision-making processes, and their needs and related rights are frequently overlooked.

Against the backdrop of increased risk due to ERW, interventions have been implemented by various agencies to prevent further injury and potential

disability in Gaza. Clearance of ERW is spearheaded by UNMAS and consequent rubble removal by UNDP to facilitate reconstruction. Risk-education activities in Gaza, coordinated by UNMAS, are geared towards reduction of related risks and have been undertaken by several UN and international agencies such as Handicap International, Save the Children, Norwegian People's Aid, International Committee of the Red Cross, and United Nations Relief and Works Agency. These efforts have empowered hundreds of school teachers and thousands of children, students, and pupils as well as people living in contaminated areas, such as farmers, construction workers, fishermen, and scrap-metal collectors and sellers, to identify and safely respond to any suspicious devices

they encounter. These interventions are part of the larger global objective of protecting vulnerable populations.

To ensure that all persons with and without disabilities benefit from risk education, the materials have been adapted to the needs of persons with disabilities because their exclusion would make them vulnerable to multiple disabilities, thus doubly vulnerable compared to their peers without disabilities. This has been made possible through recruitment of staff with special skills (e.g.: sign language) who make it possible to reach out to everyone, including persons with all forms of disabilities, including cognitive and sensory impairments. Sensitized and trained persons with disabilities then pass on their knowledge to their peers. Educational materials are developed



After years of conflict in Gaza, the prevailing dangers posed by explosive remnants of war underline the need for humanitarian communities to commit to the prevention of disability and engage in ongoing efforts to raise awareness about safe behavior.

in ways that meet their needs as well, such as by using friendly colors and combining audio and visual materials for those with both hearing and visual impairments.

For persons who have been injured as a result of ERW, a referral mechanism is in place that seeks to ensure that they get much-needed assistance through organizations that provide multidisciplinary services such as medical, rehabilitation, psychosocial, and occupational therapy, among others, in order to ensure that injuries, insofar as possible, do not develop into permanent disabilities.

On the whole, risk education has resulted in several individuals and families reporting encounters with ERW, many of which were handed over to authorities for diffusion and clearance. These officers themselves are also at risk of injury through these very ordnances, and some of them have paid with their lives for the safety of their communities.<sup>iv</sup> Their efforts attempt to ensure as much as possible that the people of Gaza live in safety and resume their ability to be productive.

*Alaa Khatib is a Palestinian who works as a project manager with Handicap International and is responsible for the implementation of risk-education interventions. He is a business administration graduate who is passionate about working with vulnerable populations, in particular persons with disabilities.*

*Silvester Kasozi is the Gaza field coordinator for Handicap International and oversees the implementation of the organization's overall program in the Gaza Strip. A Ugandan by nationality, he is a sociologist by training, a seasoned writer, and a socio-economic development enthusiast.*

*Article photos courtesy of Handicap International.*

<sup>i</sup> See "Healing the Wounds," Handicap International, 2015, available at: <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Healing%20the%20Wounds%20-%20Handicap%20International%20-%20Gaza%20-%20March%202015.pdf>.

<sup>ii</sup> See *Bombs Under the Rubble: A Study of Awareness of Explosive Remnants of War Among the Population of Gaza*, Handicap International, 2014, available at: <http://www.handicap-international.fr/system/files/documents/files/2015-hi-report-gaza.pdf>.

<sup>iii</sup> Disabilities Representative Bodies Network (DRBN) is an umbrella organization of Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) in Palestine.

<sup>iv</sup> See Ruth Pollard, "Gaza team defuses live bombs and shells without protective suits," *The Sidney Morning Herald*, August 8, 2014, available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/world/gaza-team-defuses-live-bombs-and-shells-without-protective-suits-20140808-101qme.html#ixzz3AlmENftg>.



*Risk education for children with disabilities at Palestine Avenir Child Foundation.*