



ICRC

Not All Scars Are Visible in Gaza

Courtesy of the International Committee of the Red Cross

The latest escalation that broke out in May 2021 in Gaza was among the most intense hostilities the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has witnessed in the region in years. A significant – and mostly invisible – consequence of the escalation is the impact it has on the mental and psychosocial well-being of the people who live under recurrent cycles of violence. This is especially true for children.

Supporting children's mental health can be lifesaving in times of conflict and is just as important as stitching up a bleeding wound or having clean water. The ICRC believes that access to mental health during and after conflict is essential to support the social fabric of societies that have suffered through conflicts.

Moreover, repeated violence puts an additional burden on the population. After hostilities are over, the extent of traumatic experiences that people in general, and children in particular, will have undergone will be enormous. Particularly for those who were injured or lost loved ones, the harrowing memories and grief remain. In fact, Palestinian children will bear the mental consequences of these and other hostilities for many years to come. Drones buzzing, airstrikes banging and sirens wailing... Children in Gaza live in constant fear. Among the psychological signs from which they suffer are irritable mood, despair, and bedwetting, and they try to avoid images or anything that might bring back memories of the traumatic events and night terrors.

In Gaza, we met Ahed, Bilal, Amal, and Rahaf who shared their feelings and experiences during the latest escalation with us.

Ahed is 11 years old and lives in Al-Bureij refugee camp. "The memories that stick in my mind are the sounds of airstrikes and of ambulances. In the evening and when it's dark, I'm most afraid," says Ahed. Terrified by the sound of exploding bombs, Ahed would run to hide in her mother's lap. Other times, she would look for a safe haven at her grandparents' house, but she also had to watch



■ Ahed

them flee their house and seek shelter in a safer place – or at least this was what the family hoped for.

What makes the issue of mental well-being during conflict so critical is the fact that the consequences of the hostilities remain even if the violence ends. Children will not be able to relax or sleep for days, months, or even years after a

conflict is over.

Bilal, 9 years and six months old, from Gaza City, says, "Our neighbor's house was bombed at six o'clock in the morning. I couldn't sleep because the bombing was so intensive. And I cannot forget seeing how the dead and the injured were pulled out from under the rubble."

To protect themselves, children in Gaza were forced to hide around the



■ Bilal

clock. Given the lack of underground shelters, Bilal had to hide under a table, waiting to hear the sirens of ambulances declare the end of bombardments. “The bombing was close by and very strong. I would sit under the table and put my hands on my head. When it was over, my dad would come, try to calm me down, and comfort me.” This is how Bilal conveyed what he had to go through each and every time there was an airstrike nearby.

It is fair to say that there is an alarming need in Gaza for mental and psychosocial support for children. They need help to be able to cope with their reality and overcome traumatic experiences. “What I fear most is to be alone, far away from my parents. I’m always worried that either side breaches the ceasefire agreement,” Bilal says. For him, feelings of fear and loneliness will



■ Amal

linger on.

Drones and bombs still echo in **Amal's** head too whenever someone in the house shuts the door. Ten years old and from Beit Hanoun, she says, “Whenever I hear the door, I whisper to myself, ‘Is the war back? Will we lose our home? Are we going to die?’”

Another challenge that people in Gaza have to face is the possibility

of becoming houseless. Losing one’s house in the wake of ongoing hostilities could be horrifying. Children in Gaza have told us that home means family, love, hope, safety and protection. It is where they were born and raised and the place they hold dearest to their hearts, especially because most of them have been living under siege for almost their entire lives.



■ Rahaf

Therefore, they are strongly attached to their houses.

Rahaf, 10, from Beit Hanoun, was devastated to see her bedroom destroyed by bombing in the latest escalation. “I kept the things that mean a lot to me in a bag near me in case I have to flee the house. Whenever I heard drones approaching, I would clutch onto the bag as hard as I could,” Rahaf says. “The moment the ceiling came crashing down on my bedroom, I felt like all of my dreams were shattered... I felt like I lost all of my beautiful memories... everything I love was destroyed in that bedroom,” adds Rahaf, choking back her tears.

When Rahaf’s home was destroyed, her entire family had taken shelter in it. Her aunts and uncles had sought refuge at her house because they thought they’d be safer there. As the family fled the house, they separated

from one another. Rahaf had to see her mother go one way, as she went the other. The screaming of kids as they ran away from their homes under the bombing still reverberates in Rahaf’s ears. She is still petrified by the idea that, one day, she might lose one of her family members or end up alone, without a family or a roof over her head.

Amid all the anger, panic, sadness, loneliness, and fear, children in Gaza dream of becoming dentists, artists, and professional swimmers. They dream of waking up one day to find that all movement restrictions have been lifted. They want to be able to move freely and to travel the world. They like to read, draw, act, play sports, and go out with their family and friends. Despite all the horror, children in Gaza still have hopes and dreams for a better future.

Article photos by M.Ai Rifi/ICRC.