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News note

UNICEF: In Gaza, nearly one-third of fatalities are children; massive destruction of homes, schools and health facilities

NEW YORK, 16 January 2009 - After three weeks of fighting, the Office of the UN's Humanitarian Coordinator (OCHA) reports that nearly one-third of those killed in the Gaza Strip – some 340 – were children, and that 1600 more children have been moderately to severely injured. Yesterday was the worst day for fatalities, according to OCHA, with 24 children killed.

At a UNICEF press briefing in Geneva today, its Regional Director for the Middle East, Sigrid Kaag, repeated earlier calls for the protection of children caught in the conflict.

Movement within Gaza is still extremely limited and dangerous and it has become increasingly difficult for humanitarian organizations, including UNICEF, to assess needs and distribute aid.

Kaag also expressed concerns about the mental well-being of children in Gaza, noting that its children had very high stress levels even prior to the current outbreak of violence. In addition to emergency assistance, UNICEF and its partners are now prioritizing support to help children regain some sense of normalcy, including an eventual return to school.

Education is a proven coping mechanism for children, and is the subject most often raised by parents in their calls to the UNICEF-sponsored hotlines that continue to operate in Gaza.

In addition to the destruction of homes, schools and health facilities, a UNICEF partner advises that as of 14 January, 59 schools have been damaged in the fighting. The start of the school year has been postponed until February and UNICEF is preparing to re-furnish schools hit by missile strikes.

UNICEF emergency supplies, including large numbers of school kits, are being moved into Gaza although distribution is being hampered by severe congestion at border points which are opened sporadically to humanitarian agencies. No trucks entered Gaza today.

About UNICEF

UNICEF is on the ground in over 150 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments

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