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Gaza: Paediatricians call on UK government to stop selling arms to Israel

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Paediatricians and child health professionals are urging the UK government to stop selling arms to Israel and to impose sanctions on produce from illegal Israeli settlements to help push for a ceasefire.

In an open letter to the prime minister, Rishi Sunak, 260 doctors and nurses said that the continued sale of arms to Israel meant that the UK was “indirectly perpetuating the decimation of this generation of Palestinian children.”¹

The letter has been signed by dozens of consultant paediatricians from around the UK, as well as organisations including the British Association for Community Child Health and leading voices in academia such as Delanjathan Devakumar, co-director of the UCL Centre for the Health of Women, Children and Adolescents.

They wrote, “We have watched in agony as the consequences for children have worsened by the day in the form of death, lifelong disablement, displacement, orphanhood and untold mental health difficulties. We have a duty to advocate for children everywhere and we cannot silently stand by whilst the UK government continues to sell arms to Israel . . . We urge you, the Prime Minister, to consider our appeal and ensure you are on the right side of history.”

The UN child agency Unicef reports that more than 13 000 children have been killed since October, with thousands more injured. Additionally, around 1.7 million people in Gaza have been internally displaced, half of them children.² “They do not have enough access to water, food, fuel, and medicine. Their homes have been destroyed; their families torn apart,” Unicef warned.

More than 250 humanitarian and human rights organisations have called on all UN member states to stop supplying weapons, parts, and ammunition to Israeli and Palestinian armed groups.³

“Wounded child, no surviving family”

The situation for many children in Gaza has become so dire that the Austrian non-profit organisation SOS Children’s Villages says that a new acronym—WCNSF, meaning “wounded child, no surviving family”—has had to be created. “[This] is a sobering reminder of the heavy price children are paying, and will continue to pay, for this brutal war,” said the organisation.⁴ It added that an estimated 17 000 Palestinian children were now unaccompanied or separated from their parents in Gaza.

Last month the UK’s Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health released a statement on the situation in Gaza,⁵ calling for all hostages to be released and for a “ceasefire without delay.”

Commenting on the ongoing situation, the college’s president, Steve Turner, said, “We remain deeply concerned about the ongoing situation for children and healthcare professionals living in Israel and Gaza. We have written to the secretary of state, David Cameron, to call on him to use his diplomatic powers and influence to protect and support children and young people, health and aid workers, health facilities and infrastructure, as well as access to resources including food and water.”

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- 2 Unicef. Appeal: Children in Gaza need life-saving support. <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/children-gaza-need-lifesaving-support>
- 3 Save the Children. Over 250 humanitarian and human rights organisations join call to end arms transfers to Israel, Palestinian armed groups. 11 Apr 2024. <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/250-organisations-call-for-end-to-arms-transfers-israel-palestine>
- 4 Bradford S. The war in Gaza is having a catastrophic impact on children, stripping them of their rights. Bond. 28 Feb 2024. <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2024/02/the-war-in-gaza-is-having-a-catastrophic-impact-on-children-stripping-them-of-their-rights/>
- 5 Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. Paediatricians call for protection of children and families in the Middle East. 21 Mar 2024. <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/news-events/news/paediatricians-call-protection-children-families-middle-east>