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#HEARTHEIRVOICES: LASTING TRAUMA: DRAWINGS FROM THREE PALESTINE REFUGEE SIBLINGS IN GAZA

21 March 2024



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Khayri, Menna and Mira dressed and ready for school before the war. © 2023 UNRWA Photo

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The war in Gaza has already over 31,000 Palestinian lives. Children make up more than 13,000 of the dead. Almost 74,000 people have been injured, including thousands of children.

Beyond the death and the physical injuries, the war is also taking an undeterminably high toll on the mental health of all inhabitants of the Gaza Strip.

Children and youths, in particular, are being profoundly impacted and face a spectrum of long-lasting challenges, including acute distress, post-traumatic stress, behavioral issues, and emotional turmoil. A particular concern is the



outlook for the approximately 17,000 united nations relief and works agency (/en) publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-23-february-2024-1500 children who, tragically, are now unaccompanied or separated from their parents (https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-23-february-2024-1500). And overall, up to 70 per cent of the nearly 1 million children and adolescents (https://www.npr.org/2023/10/19/1206479861/israel-gaza-hamas-children-population-war-palestinians) in the Gaza Strip have met the diagnostic criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) because of the war.

As in war zones around the world, drawings offer stark insights into the impact of trauma on children.

Asmaa is a mother to three young children. She, her husband, and the children were internally displaced at the start of the war in Gaza. Asmaa has shared drawings by her children, made while they were seeking refuge in an UNRWA shelter. She first used the drawings to encourage her children to talk about their feelings and thoughts. Asmaa would talk with her children every time they finished one. Her understanding of what the children intended to express through their art is captured below.



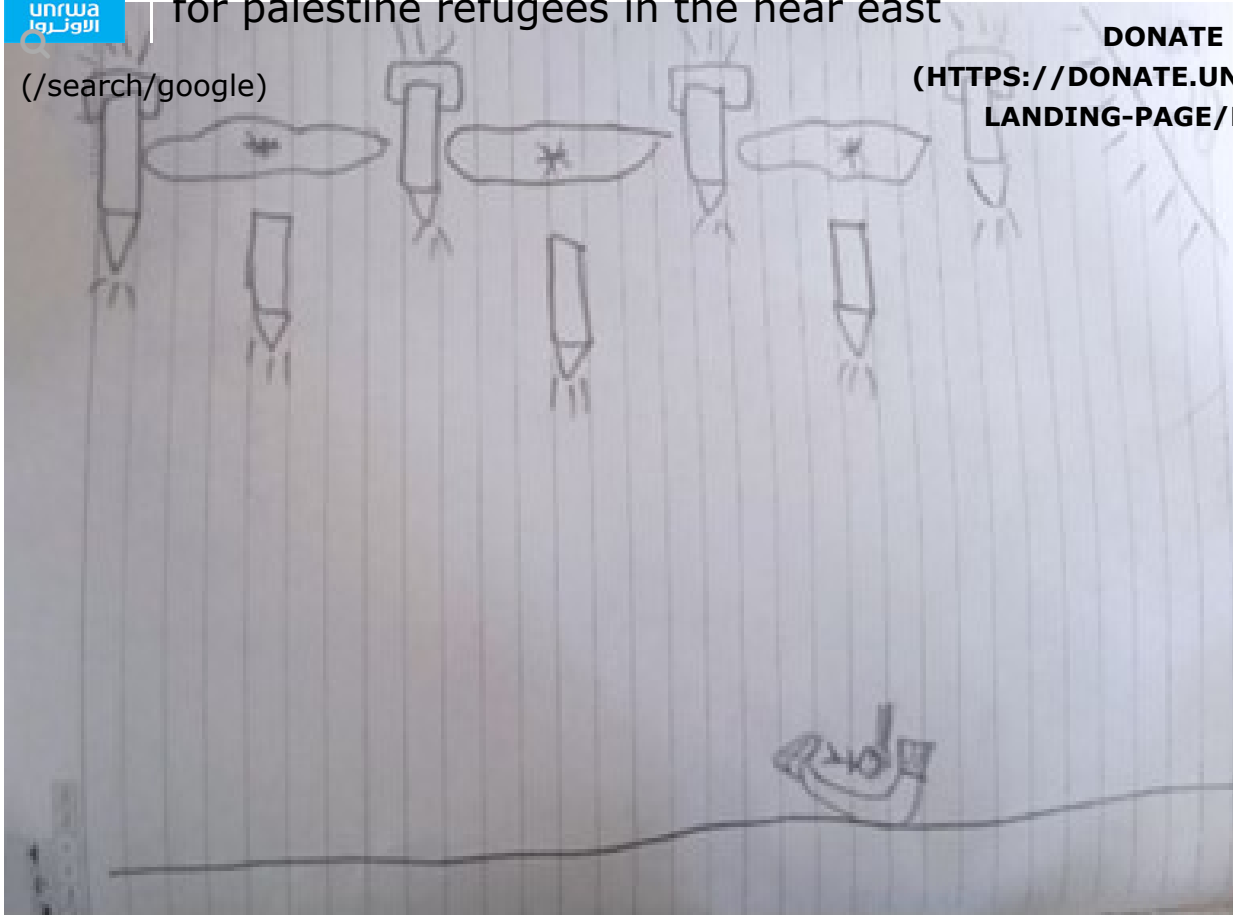
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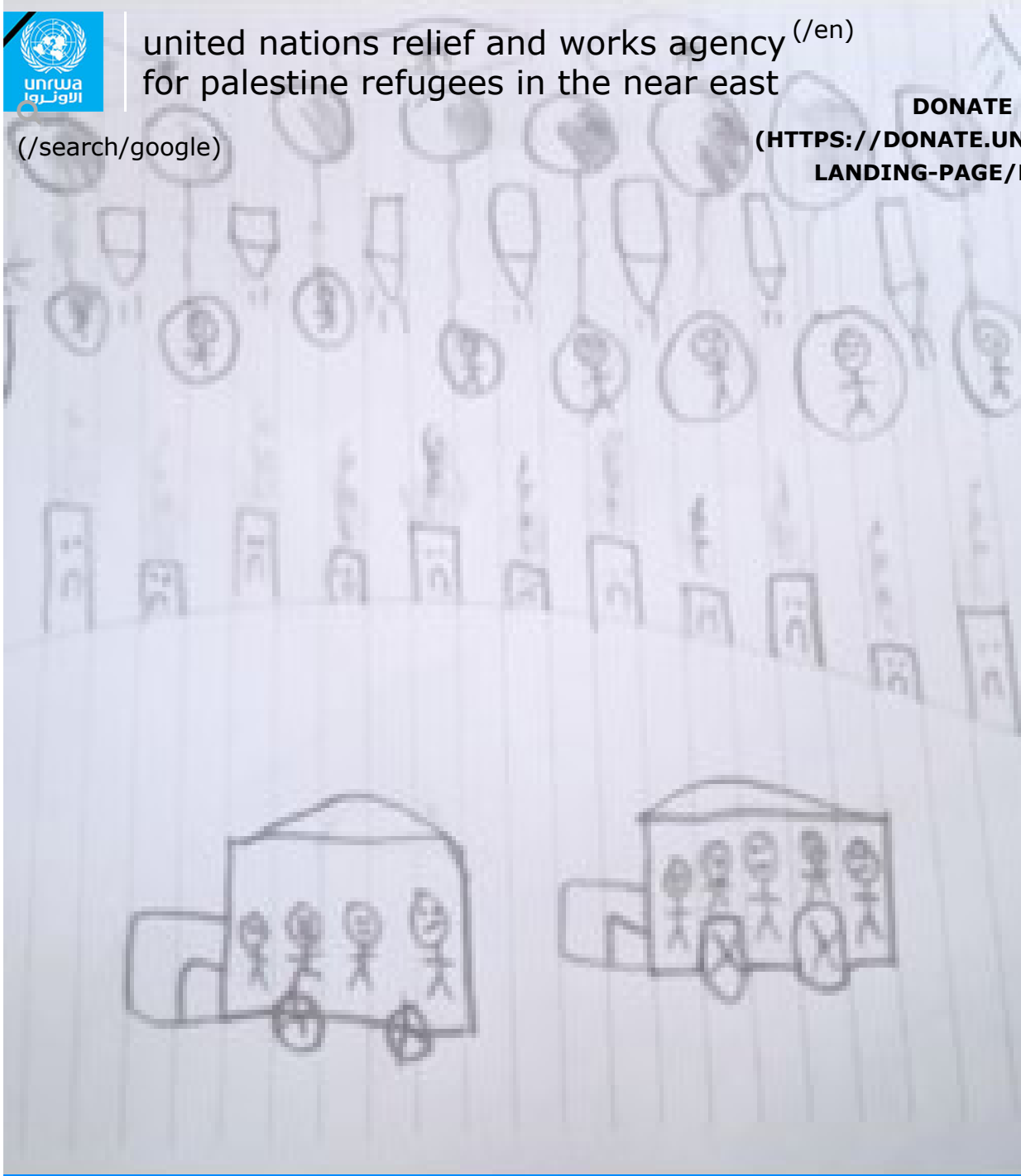
"I engaged in conversations with my children every time they completed a drawing," said Asmaa. "Initially, the drawings served as a means to encourage my children to talk about their feelings and thoughts," she notes. Her six-year-old daughter Menna drew the picture above. "A sad scene where a poor child was sleeping on a bed in the street with no shelter. Suddenly, a fighter aircraft appeared in a sky already filled with people who had become stars. Rockets began falling, and the child lost his life, joining the stars above," Menna described.



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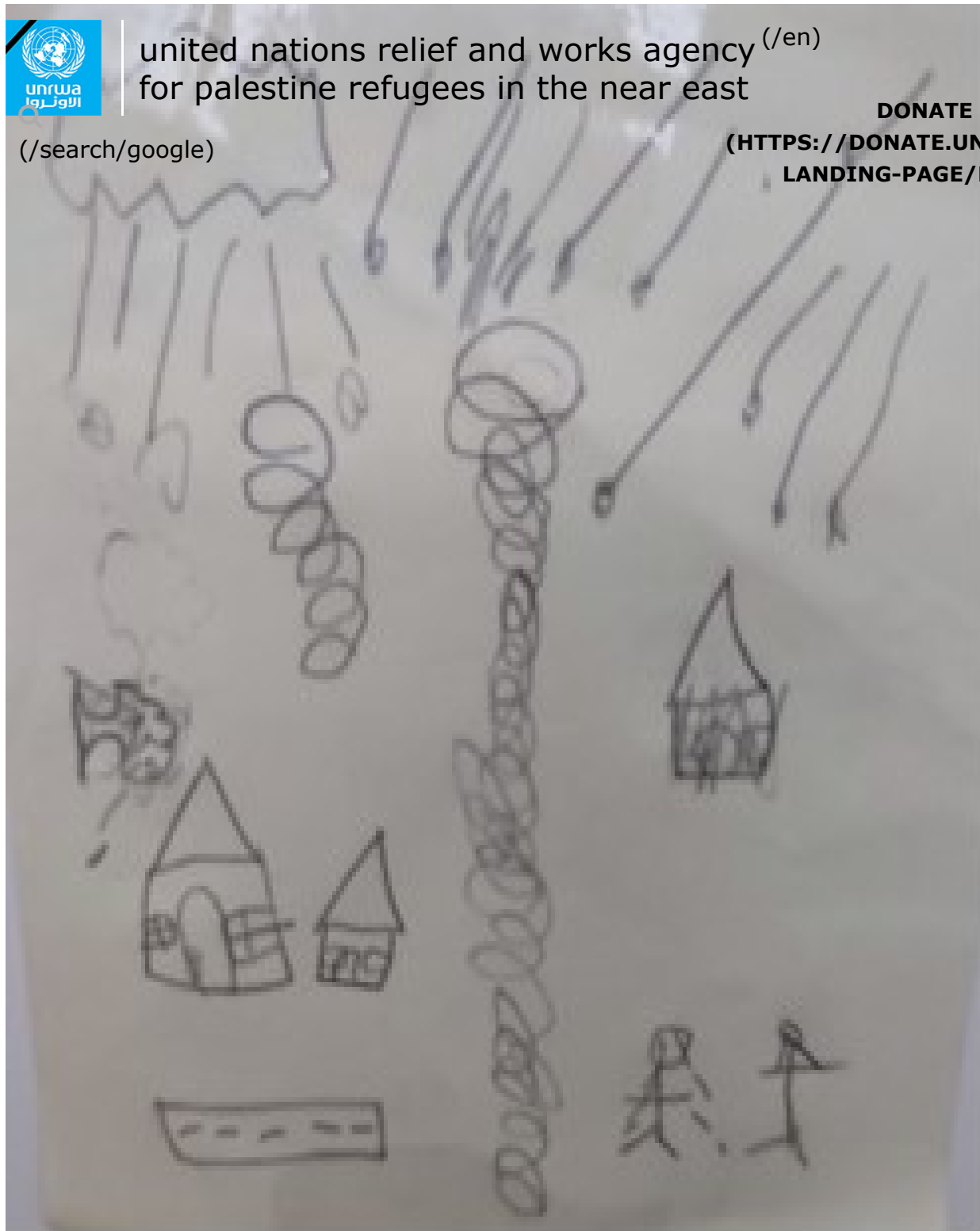
“The sight of airplanes in the sky triggers loud shouts to hide, warning that a bomb is incoming. I am concerned that these perceptions and reactions may lead to potential future issues, especially when they attend school,” laments Asmaa.



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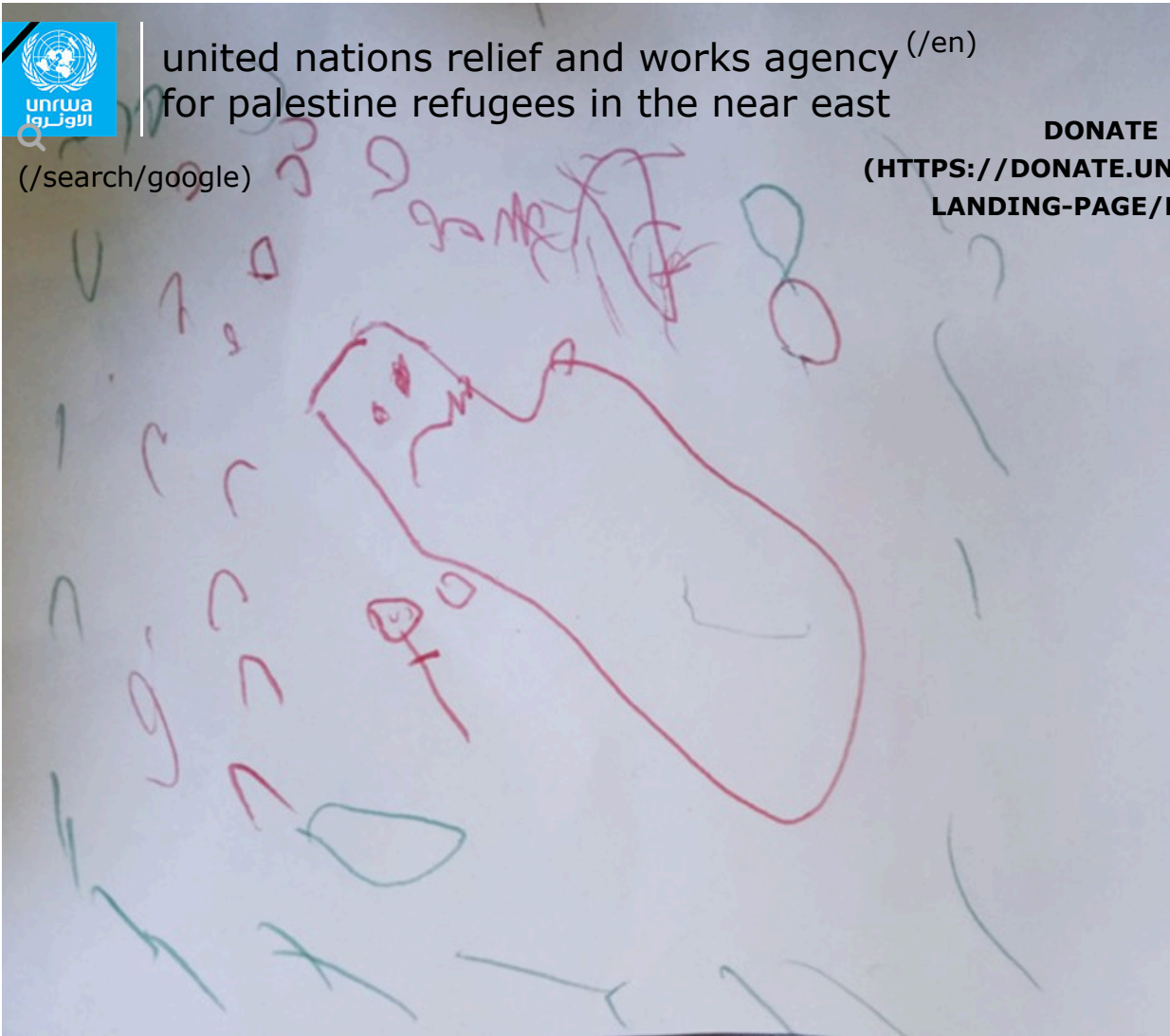
"I've observed a noticeable change in [their] behaviour," recalls Asmaa. "My eldest daughter, in particular, is exhibiting heightened sensitivity. She cries often, at least once or twice a day. Even moments that start lightheartedly quickly transition to sadness. She often expresses missing her aunts, grandmother, and school friends," said Asmaa. Her five-year-old son Khayri, meanwhile, drew the image above. "In a lost time and place in this unjust world, there were only houses filled with sorrow and tears, where a tree was praying for everything to end. The sky rained fires, missiles, anger, and hatred. A great whirlwind was born and swallowed everything in its path. The tree fell, the houses crumbled, and dreams inside the homes disappeared," is how Asmaa recalls Khayri describing what he drew.



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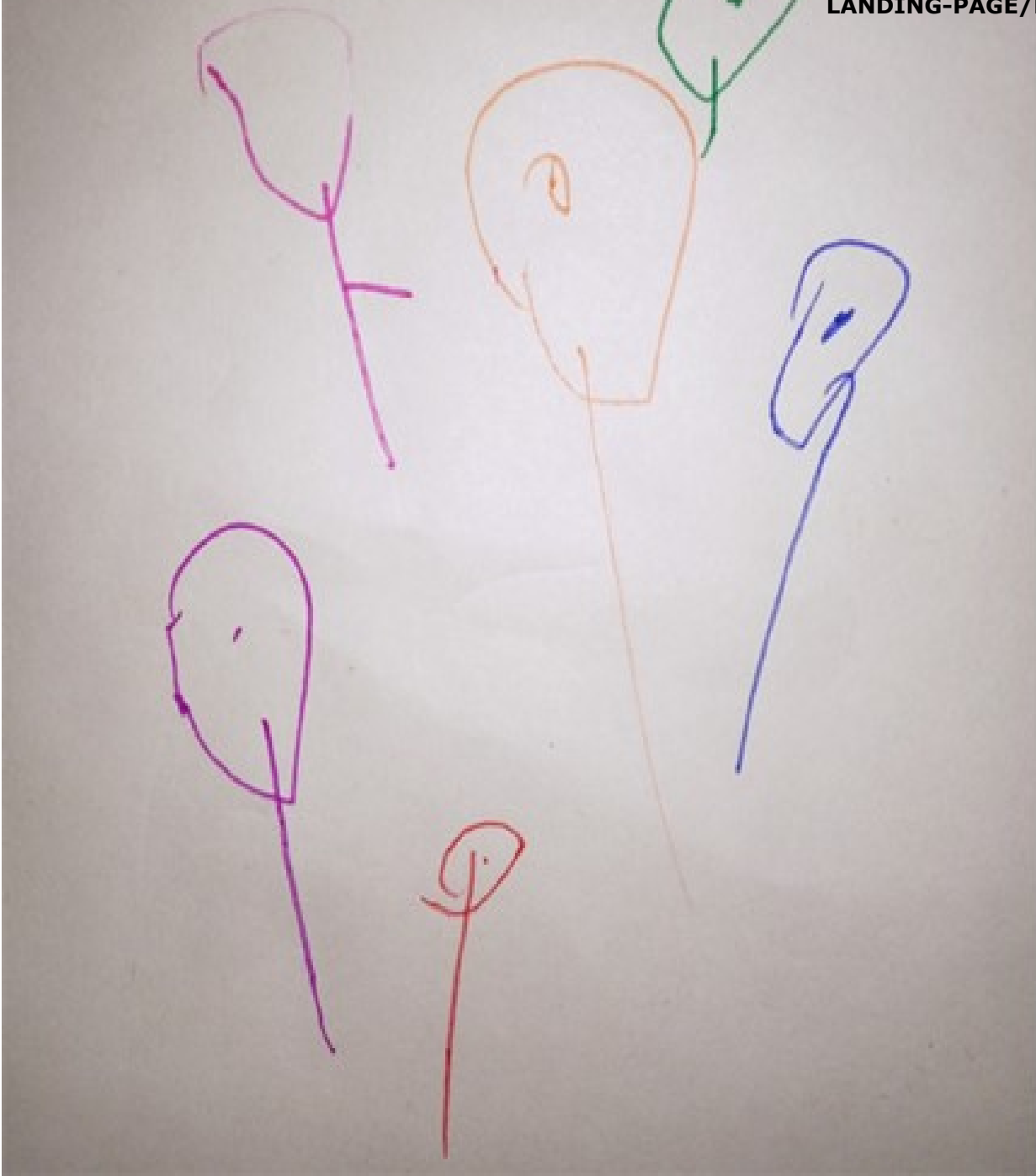
Gender-based disparities have been highlighted in previous research conducted in Gaza, revealing that girls tend to bear a disproportionately higher burden of stress and anxiety compared to boys. Mira, 3, drew the picture above. Asmaa describes it: "A brave mom bravely guards her little one even as she finds herself surrounded by dead people. While her heart shakes with fear, her bravery and love for her child shines like a light in the darkness."



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"My youngest daughter regresses to behaving like a baby, like a child a few months of age. During these episodes, she doesn't speak, lies on the ground, and utters only fragmented letters, resembling the sounds made by newborns, such as "mma bbba," says Asmaa.



Some studies suggest that the more prolonged the conflict, the more severe the symptoms. These include feelings of hopelessness, and dissociative disorders, with common symptoms such as disengagement from the external world. Mira drew the picture above, telling Asmaa, "Mothers are filled with sorrow. Each mother and daughter are drawn in a special colour. They are all crying because their houses – the blue rubble – have all been destroyed. Day after day, mothers begin to lose their children, and in the end, they lose them all. They became mothers with only one eye, forever carrying the pain of their loss." she describes. This meaning is derived from



Having been evacuated to Türkiye, Asmaa finds that Gaza has followed closely in the minds of her children. "The topic of Gaza dominates our daily conversations...my children mention it incessantly — no less than a hundred times a day," she says. Menna drew the picture above when an entire residential compound was destroyed. "Heavy bombs rained down on it. Tragically, many innocent children lost their lives, and in their memory, their spirits rose to the sky, where they now shine as stars," Menna told her mother.



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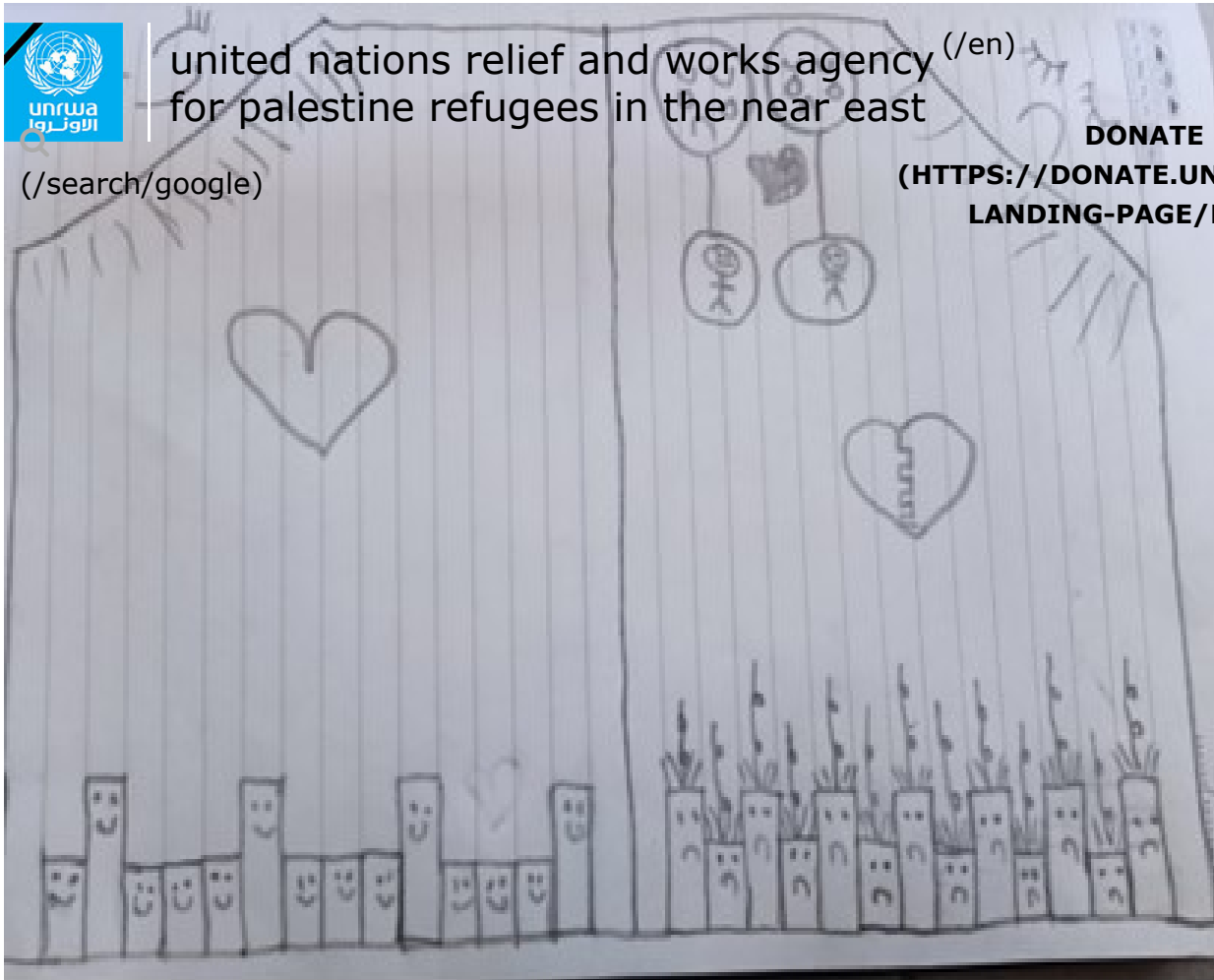
“One day, when water was no longer available in their homes, mothers asked their children to go to the nearby al-Sousi mosque to collect water. The children formed a line to collect war when the mosque was struck. Nine children died there,” said Asmaa. Menna drew the above picture, and described the scene, “The ambulances raced away, and the blood of the children seemed to rise into the sky, perhaps preparing to transform into stars in heaven.”



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“Whenever they see an advertisement featuring an individual, a man, woman, or child, they loudly inquire if the person is a martyr, questioning whether they have been killed. They openly declare that the person in the image has met a tragic fate,” Asmaa notes. Menna also drew the above. She said, “Before the war, we used to love each other. People were happy, but after the war began, hearts were shattered, and people started leaving for the sky, becoming stars.”

UNRWA continues to provide psychosocial support services, including psychosocial first aid services and psychosocial support consultations and intervention sessions in the Gaza Strip. Sessions on handling psychological fatigue, as well as group and recreational activities are carried out consistently. Since the war began, around 570,000 internally displaced persons have received support (</resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-91-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem>), including more than 300,000 children.



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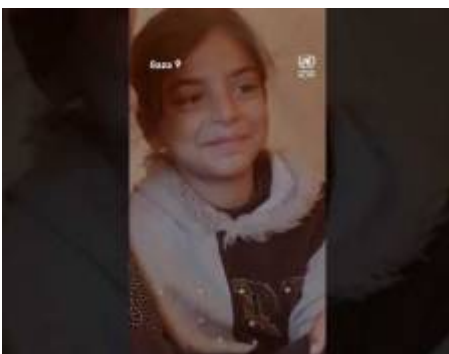


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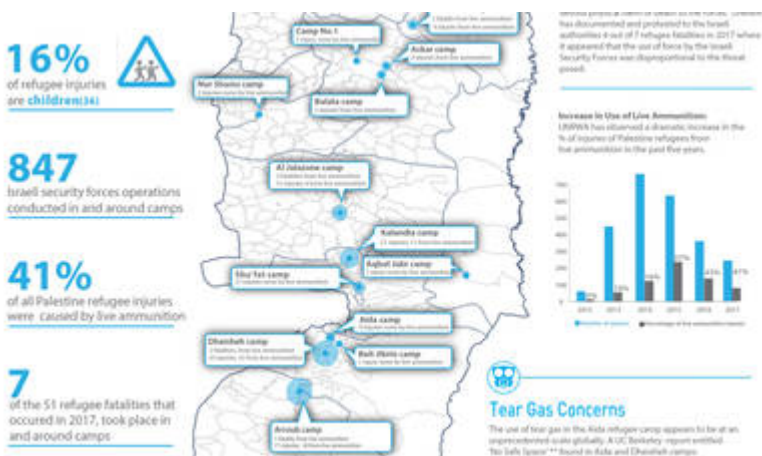
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