

Dying in waiting: Gaza's children face lethal delays in medical evacuation

This is a summary of what was said by UNICEF Spokesperson James Elder – to whom quoted text may be attributed - at today's press briefing at the Palais des Nations in Geneva

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UNICEF

FILE Photo, 9-year-old Jouri in the European Hospital, Khan Younis, Gaza on 9 April 2024. The bones in Jouri's right arm, wrist and the right side of her face had several breaks, likely requiring further surgery. She had serious open wounds that were yet to receive reconstructive surgery – the hospital was not able to do this so was forced to focus on keeping the wound clean.

GENEVA, 25 October 2024 - "Children are being medically evacuated from Gaza at a rate of fewer than one child per day. If this lethally slow pace continues, it would take more than seven years to evacuate the 2,500 children needing urgent medical care.

"As a result, children in Gaza are dying – not just from the bombs, bullets and shells that strike them – but because, even when “miracles happen”, even when the bombs go off and the homes collapse and the casualties mount, *but* the children survive, they are then prevented from leaving Gaza to receive the urgent care that would save their lives.

"This year, from 1 January to 7 May, an average of 296 children were medically evacuated each month. Since the Rafah crossing closed on 7 May due to the ground offensive there, the number of children medically evacuated has collapsed to just 22 per month.

"That is, just 127 children – many suffering from head trauma, amputations, burns, cancer, and severe malnutrition – have been allowed to leave since Rafah closed.

"One of the many tragedies of Gaza is that appalling figures have failed to stir those with power to act. Please then allow me to share with you a few of the children whose futures are bound by these crushing constraints. These are, sadly, by no means unique.

"Mazyona. She's 12. When two rockets struck her home, she was thought dead. Mazyona had no pulse. Both her siblings, Hala, 13 and Mohamed, 10, were killed.

"Mazyona sustained devastating injuries to her face—her face was nearly torn off. Surgeons have held the remaining structure together, but she urgently requires a medevac for specialized care and bone surgery. Mazyona also still has shrapnel in her neck. She is of course in immense pain, and her condition is worsening. The platinum surgically used to rebuild her face is coming out, and doctors have stated that she needs surgeries outside of Gaza to save her life. Mazyona has been denied medical evacuation four times. Authorities suggested that the medevac could proceed without Mazyona's mother accompanying her. However, when her father attempted to take the next steps, Mazyona was again denied.

"Elia is 4 years old. Elia, her parents and siblings were sleeping in their home in Al Nussirat early last month when a shell fell on the neighbouring house, causing a large fire that engulfed their home.

"Elia has fourth-degree burns. Her leg was amputated. Most recently, given delays in medical evacuation, doctors had to amputate fingers from Elia's right hand. Elia has been in hospital for 43 days.

"When I met Elia earlier this month, her mother, Eslam, was in the bed beside her also with fourth-degree burns. She also needed urgent medical evacuation, both for her burns and severe blood poisoning. Her wounds were covered in fungus. Eslam was denied medical evacuation. She died two days ago, on Wednesday.

"Since her mother's death, Elia has received approval for medical evacuation. No date was given. Given the number of cases, it is unlikely to happen soon. Doctors have said they fear they will soon have to amputate 4-year-old Elia's hand and her other leg if she is not medically evacuated.

"Atef is 6 months old. He is battling muscle cancer and suffers from severe malnutrition. Atef has also had a kidney tube inserted due to complications, further worsening his fragile condition. However, despite the severity of this baby's situation, like so many thousands of children, suitable medical care is close by, though outside of Gaza.

"Last month Atef's mother, Amal, was forced to evacuate from northern Gaza, carrying sick Atef in her arms, walking long distances under extreme circumstances just to reach Al Aqsa Hospital. Despite its size, Al Aqsa lacks the necessary resources to treat her son.

"With no home to return to, Amal has set up a tent near the hospital, living in dangerous and polluted conditions. Every day, Atef's condition deteriorates, and he urgently needs medical evacuation to access specialized care. Atef is Amal's only child. She has been waiting for any news on her request for medical evacuation for two months.

"It is not known how many child patients have been rejected for medevac. Only a list of approved patients is provided by Israel's COGAT – which controls Gaza's entry and exit points. The status of others is not shared. When a patient is denied, there is nothing that can be done. Trapped in the grip of an indifferent bureaucracy, children's pain is brutally compounded.

"And so, Mazyona, her face shattered and siblings dead, or Amal – and her despair as her son dies from a treatable illness – receive the unthinkable news: 'No'. No treatment, no pain relief, no escape. COGAT does not provide reasons for refusals.

"All of this unfolds amid relentless bombings, as Gaza's hospitals have been decimated, leaving them unable to care for the flood of child patients. Medical staff repeatedly report urgent shortages of essentials like needles, plaster, burn cream, IV fluids, and painkillers – along with critical items like wheelchairs, crutches, hearing aids, even batteries.

"After more than a year of attempting to shed light on the atrocities being committed against children in Gaza, perhaps then it is this that is the clearest and most damning reality: children – deeply unwell children – are being denied the medical care that could save them in Gaza, and then prevented from leaving to places where help awaits. Children are thus being denied the medical care that is a basic human right, and those who barely survived ruthless bombings are condemned to die from their injuries.

"This is not a logistical problem – we have the ability to safely transport these children out of Gaza. It is not a capacity problem – indeed, we were evacuating children at higher numbers just months ago. It is simply a problem that is being completely disregarded."

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