I MISS MY HOUSE AND MY PINK DRESS

Palestinian children's voices
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TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY:
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Save the Children Sweden fights for children’s rights. We deliver immediate and lasting improvements to children’s lives worldwide.
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A boy collecting pieces of tile in the rubble of demolished houses. Khan Younis, 2002
Foreword

save the children sweden works to protect and promote children’s rights in Sweden and throughout the world. the UN convention on the rights of the child is the foundation on which we build this work. the convention gives children the right to express their views on all matters that concern them, so enabling children to make their voices heard is one of the most important objectives for save the children’s work.

in spring 2004, save the children sweden commissioned the journalist and photographer mia grönåhl to interview palestinian children and their families whose houses have been demolished by the israeli army. the families are from Jenin on the West Bank, and Rafah and Khan Younis in Gaza Strip. in this report the children and their families talk about how their homes and belongings were destroyed; but above all, they talk about how they have lost all sense of security and about the uncertainty and fear which have become their constant companions.

“I didn’t go to school for a week after they knocked our house down”, says an eleven-year-old girl in Gaza. “Now I’m always scared all the time. It’s unfair that me and my friends have to be so scared. Children in other countries can feel safe in their own homes.”

the demolition of dwelling houses described in this report represents a serious violation of human rights; it is a breach of the UN convention on the rights of the child (CRC), of several other conventions, and of international humanitarian law.

under the terms of the CRC, states are to “take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict.” israel has ratified the convention, and is therefore obliged to respect and apply it in the occupied palestinian territories. as an occupying power israel is also under the obligation to protect the civil population of palestine, and that includes children.

since autumn 2000, when the second intifada began, the situation for the palestinian children living on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has deteriorated. the children’s rights to protection, to education, to health, their right to survival and development, are constantly being violated. in 2003 save the children sweden published the interview-based report, “One Day in Prison Feels Like a Year”; and two further reports, produced in collaboration with save the children UK, have portrayed the situation faced by palestinian children: “Growing Up Under Curfew” and “Living Behind Barriers - palestinian Children Speak Out”. in these three reports, children describe the impact the on-going conflict has had on their everyday lives.

in the present report, save the children sweden is again seeking to give palestinian children the opportunity to describe in their own words the reality in which they live. but save the children is also concerned with ensuring that these children’s rights are upheld, so in the concluding section of the report save the children therefore addresses a number of demands to the international community and to the government of israel and the palestinian authority.

stockholm, October 2004

Charlotte Petri Gornitzka
Secretary General, save the Children Sweden
– I was scared they were going to come and get my Dad, Qusai says. The soldiers take all the men who are over fifteen, so they would have taken my Dad, my uncles and all my older cousins.
Qusai Noursi, aged 13

I’m scared of the helicopter. But most of all I’m scared that the soldiers will come back, knock down all the buildings in the camp and build a settlement here as well...

A few hours before the Israeli army burst into Jenin, the Noursi family, which in addition to Qusai consists of his mother and father and six brothers and sisters, managed to get out of the refugee camp. They made their way to the safety of a relative’s house on the outskirts of the city, and that is where they are still living.

During the following three weeks the family were forced to stay indoors, cut off from any possibility of going out to buy things they needed, or of getting in touch with friends and neighbours who were still inside the refugee camp.

– In the distance we could hear the shooting from the armoured cars and helicopters, says Qusai, who had turned eleven that spring. Sometimes I looked out of the window - just a quick look because it was dangerous, but I wanted to see what was going on out there. We were a little way off from the camp but we could still hear the Israeli soldiers, they were shouting and screaming all the time.

A large number of the extended family had come to the house for shelter. They all gathered in the living room, the safest room in the house, and they stayed there round the clock. The electricity supply was turned off: there were no lamps to light up the long nights, and the television screen was dead. Many of the people squeezed into the room turned to the Koran for comfort. Qusai, too, searched in his memory for prayers he liked and said them quietly to himself.

– I feel safer when I read the Koran, says Qusai. I prayed for the soldiers to leave the camp, that they would get tired and go home. There was a battery radio in the house which we often listened to, to find out what was happening in the camp.

After ten days there came a cry of distress from the refugee camp: there was no food or water, and ill and wounded people could not be taken out of the camp for treatment. Half a mile away, Qusai was stuck indoors, afraid that the soldiers would search every house in the city.
– I was scared they were going to come and get my Dad, Qusai says. The soldiers take all the men who are over fifteen, so they would have taken my Dad, my uncles and all my older cousins. The whole of the time I just sat there thinking what would happen to my Dad if the soldiers came to get him. They would tie his hands, humiliate him and beat him. Most of all, I was afraid they would shoot him.

On 18 April 2002 the Israeli army withdrew its troops from central Jenin, and the following day UNRWA, the United Nations’ Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, declared the refugee camp a disaster area. On that same day, the residents who had fled three weeks before began returning. When the Noursi family reached the camp they could not believe what they saw: it looked as if the area had been hit by an earthquake.

Qusai could not find his old street; in fact, nothing was recognisable, everything had been smashed to ruins. The family’s house no longer existed. Although the house had been razed to the ground, the family still hoped that they’d be able to find some of their belongings in the rubble.

– I couldn’t find anything, apart from a few clothes, a blanket and my pillow, Qusai says. I’ve had that pillow since I was small. The pillow case was dirty and torn after being in the rubble, so I’ve changed it, but I still sleep on that pillow.

Qusai goes and fetches his favourite pillow, and he then holds it firmly in his arms for the rest of our conversation. His mother, Saida, who has been sitting listening to everything we’ve said, tells me that among her sons, Qusai was the one who never used to be afraid of anything. That, however, was before the invasion:

– Now he hardly dares go out of the house, Saida explains. Qusai feels nervous as soon as he hears the sound of a helicopter.
– No, I don’t! her son protests, sitting surrounded by his brothers and sisters and cousins.

At first, none of the boys is willing to admit that they are sometimes afraid, but when we’ve talked a bit about how it is normal to be frightened, how everybody feels afraid, grown-ups included, Qusai is prepared to reveal the reality beneath the tough shell.

– I’m scared of the helicopter, he says. There are soldiers in it, shooting down on people, so when I hear it I run away as far as I can. But most of all I’m scared that the soldiers will come back, knock down all the buildings in the camp and build a settlement here as well, in the middle of Jenin.
Qusai has found his pillow in the ruins of his home. Jenin, 2002.
Me and my Mom searched around in the rubble for our things, Reeham remembers. We dug among the bits of concrete with our hands, but we hardly found anything.
Reeham Taleb, aged 10

I miss our house. And I miss my dress. It was pink, and there was a little hat and bag to go with it. I’d only worn it once. I don’t think I’ll ever have such a nice dress again.

The Taleb family’s temporary accommodation in Jenin is on a slope with a view over the city and its refugee camp. A tentative spring sun is enough to make it warmer outside than inside the cold house with its walls dripping with damp.

– None of us like this house, says Fatma Taleb as she lays out small coffee cups on a plastic stool. I’d scarcely call it a place you can live, for me it’s just a roof over our heads.

Two years ago the family lost their home. Reeham points to a spot where the slope ends:

– That’s where I used to live, down there!

Between buildings and trees we can make out, in the city centre, a patch of ruins which the Israeli invasion of 2002 left behind. The name it has been given in Arabic is Nuktat al sifr, “Point Zero”, like the “Ground Zero” caused by the terrorist attacks on New York on 11 September, 2001.

– I was only eight, but I can remember everything that happened, says Reeham. When Dad thought the shooting was getting a bit too near our house he told me and my four brothers to get our mattresses and go calmly, one at a time, down the stairs to my uncle’s flat, on the bottom floor.

The two families squeezed together in the safest room in the flat, and they stayed shut in there, four adults and thirteen children, for a week. There was not a lot of food, and there was no electricity. Nobody in the room dared to use a torch or light a candle, since there was a risk that at the slightest sign of light from the windows, the soldiers would start shooting at the house. The whole time, they could hear the frightening bangs of bullets and shells all around the camp. Nobody knew what was going on beyond the four walls of the house.

– Normally my cousins and me always play when we meet up, but during those days we didn’t do anything, says Reeham. We just sat still on the mattresses
and were scared stiff that the shells would hit our house. Mum was scared as well, she kept reading the Koran all the time. I tried to comfort her by saying I wasn’t scared, just so that she wouldn’t have to worry about me as well.

On the sixth day of the fighting, the house next door was hit by a missile and blown to pieces. The families did not dare remain in their house any longer, so they crept out and made their way to another building, which they thought would be a safer hiding-place. However, a few days later the army stormed all the buildings in that area, and ordered the inhabitants to go to an open field at the edge of the camp.

– When we got to the field I saw the soldiers for the first time, says Reeham. There were loads of Israeli soldiers, several hundred, and all of them had machine guns. There were tanks lined up all around us. At first we didn’t know what was going to happen. But then we were told we weren’t allowed to go back to our homes. Mum had forgotten her asthma medicine, but they wouldn’t even let us go back and get it.

It would be thirteen days before Reeham and her family were allowed back into the camp. When they returned their house was no longer standing; in all, the Israelis and their bulldozers had completely demolished 140 buildings, and damaged another 200. A quarter of the camp’s inhabitants, nearly 4000 people, had been made homeless.

– Me and my Mom searched around in the rubble for our things, Reeham remembers. We dug among the bits of concrete with our hands, but we found hardly anything. The only things we could save were some spoons that had been burnt black, a couple of pillows and a mattress.

– But I couldn’t find a single one of my own things, continues Reeham. I spent ages looking for my pink dress. My aunty had brought it back for me from Saudi Arabia, and there was a little hat and bag to go with it. I’d only worn it once. When I had it on it made me feel really pretty. I don’t think I’ll ever have such a nice dress again.

All the family’s pictures from when Reeham was little were also gone:

– It feels like I don’t have anything left, she says. There are lots of things I miss. I often daydream about our house.

When you first meet Reeham she gives the impression of being a shy and rather nervous girl, but as you get to know her that impression changes and you realise she is tougher than her delicate appearance leads you to believe. When she’s grown up she wants to be able to help other people. She wants to be a teacher or a doctor, most of all a doctor.

– I’ve seen a lot of wounded people, at the hospital in Jenin, says Reeham. After the invasion my big brother picked up a land-mine which blew up in his face. It really scared me when I saw his face, it was burnt all over.
Fatma Taleb shakes her head with a sorrowful expression as she listens to her daughter’s plans for the future. All of her children - her four teenage sons and her only daughter, Reeham - were good at school before the invasion, but over the last two years their marks have plunged.

– Reeham has become uneasy and nervous, she finds it hard to concentrate, Fatma explains. She can’t sit still and do her studies for very long at a time. These days she sometimes goes to bed without finishing her homework, and she never used to do that before.

Naser Taleb, Reeham’s father, says that the relationship between parents and children is not the same as it was before the Palestinian uprising - the Intifada - broke out nearly four years ago. The problems are worst for the parents of teenage boys. Teenagers no longer care about what adults say, and refuse to follow any rules. Naser himself feels helpless in his role as father, and does not know what he can do about the situation.

– I can’t cope with my sons any more. They don’t behave well at school, and in the evenings they disappear off down to the refugee camp and never come back by the time we’ve told them. I realise that something has to be done about it, but at the same time I don’t want to be too hard on them, because I’m afraid that if I am I’ll lose contact with them altogether.
– But Reeham, she’s her Daddy’s little girl, Naser continues, hugging his daughter. I’m sure things will work out all right for her, as long as we can soon settle in our own house and start living a normal life again.

Reeham dreams of being a doctor.
Louai, aged two, has been found by his father. Jenin, 2002.

– I looked for them everywhere. But it was dangerous to be outside: the camp was being attacked the whole time with missiles and shells, and the Israeli snipers were up on the roofs, shooting at everything that moved.
Husain Ja’us, father of five, Jenin

We need to get back to a normal life as soon as possible. I want my children to have some peace and stability, they need a chance to forget all the terrible things that have happened.

The refugee camp of Jenin houses over 6000 children under the age of fifteen. 700 of these had their homes destroyed when the Israeli army forced its way into the camp in Spring 2002. Among those who were made homeless was Louai Ja’us, who was two years old at the time.

On 19 April 2002 the soldiers had withdrawn from the camp, and for the first time in three weeks people could go back home. However, many people returned to find that their houses had been smashed to pieces.

Many people had also been separated from each other amid the chaos of the invasion, but my camera just happened to witness the moment when Louai was reunited with his father. Now, two years on, I have managed to trace the family to their temporary home in Jenin, and for the first time I can show them the picture I took.

– I cried, and hugged my son tight, says Husain Ja’us, taking a long look at the photograph. And I remember that it felt as if Louai didn’t ever want to let go of me again either. After our family got separated at the beginning of the invasion I was afraid that I would never see my wife and children again. I thought they were dead, that they’d been shot, or even worse, that they’d got caught under the collapsing houses.

The Israeli army used armoured bulldozers to knock down houses in the camp. Many of the residents told of how the soldiers simply flattened everything that came in their way in the camp with its narrow alleys: houses, shops, parked cars, lamp-posts, pavements, walls. The Ja’us family panicked when they saw how, one after the other, the neighbouring houses were being pushed over and crushed.

– I have never seen such a big bulldozer in my life, says Husain. It was as high as a three-storey building. The children held on tight to my mother, crying and shouting, ‘Granny, Granny! Stop the bulldozer!’

Husain Ja’us’ is an electrician, and when the bulldozer drove straight into his workshop on the ground floor of their house his mother rushed down the stairs
from their flat on the upper floor, and strode out through the hole that had been made in the wall. Her grandchildren watched as their courageous grandmother walked towards the bulldozer with her hands in the air. The bulldozer slowed down, and everyone had time to get out of the house before its next attack - but as they fled, the family got split up: Husain, who had the oldest sons with him, lost contact with his wife Kifa’h and the two youngest boys.

– I looked for them everywhere. But it was dangerous to be outside: the camp was being attacked the whole time with missiles and shells, and the Israeli snipers were up on the roofs, shooting at everything that moved. The ordinary telephone network wasn’t working, and I didn’t dare to use my mobile because the army helicopters could have traced the signal and shot towards where it was coming from. It was eighteen days before I found out that Kifa’h and the boys had survived.

Today, Husain, Kifa’h and their five sons are living in a two-room flat being rented by UNRWA. The family hope that they will soon be able to move back to the camp. UNRWA have promised that the houses will be rebuilt. Husain shows me the plans for the new house; he’s pleased with the planning, because just as in their old home, there will be room on the bottom floor for his workshop.

But it looks as if it will be quite a long time before they can move back. Two years on, only a few houses have been completed and work has not even started on the Ja’us family’s house. They will not be able to move in before next year at the very earliest.

– All this waiting is taking it out of us, says Husain. We need to get back to a normal life as soon as possible. I want my children to have some peace and stability, they need a chance to forget all the terrible things that have happened.

All of the children, except the youngest, who wasn’t born at the time of the invasion, have been badly affected by the weeks of violence. Boys who once were secure in themselves are now wetting their beds almost every night, and their personalities have changed completely. Ala’a, who at ten years is the oldest, is often frightened and he has become nervous in his behaviour. Hamad, who is one year younger, is always getting into fights with his brothers and his classmates. Seven-year-old Qusai can no longer tolerate being close to loud noises, and sometimes his parents even see him holding his hands over his ears in his sleep. Husain is however most anxious about Louai, who is now four years old.

– I don’t know how much Louai remembers of the invasion, but as soon as he hears a helicopter in the sky he gets really alarmed, and runs over to the window and asks us: “Is it going to shoot at us?”.

Louai is a hyperactive boy and cannot sit still for very long at a time. Last month he broke his arm, and in the bedroom there is evidence of when he played with matches: a burnt-out wardrobe. His parents are trembling at the thought of what the next accident might be.
– Louai needs to see a psychologist, says Husain. In fact, all my children could do with psychological help, but who is going to give it to them? We feel helpless, my wife and I, we don’t know what to do about our children and their problems.

Husain Ja’us wishes that he could spend more time with his children; he knows that Kifa’h also needs his support and help with their sons - but most of his waking hours are spent looking for work. He did not only lose his home when the Israelis invaded the camp: his workshop with all his products and equipment was also buried in the ruins.

– Sometimes I feel like something has broken inside me. I’d spent twenty years fixing up the house, building an extension. After I’d met Kifa’h we got married in it. At that time I was doing extra work in Israel and earning quite good money. Now, I lie awake at night, wondering how things are going to work out for us.

In the living room there is only one piece of furniture. A new computer stands on a plastic table; Husain has bought it on hire-purchase, and he prays to God that he will find work so that he can afford the payments.

– When I worked as an electrician in Israel I saw how the Jewish children sat at home playing with their computers. I was jealous of their parents, who could afford to give their children so much. I want my children to have the same chance to learn things and keep up with developments. My hope is that my children will get a good education.
Salem Abu Musa, aged 9
Salem Abu Musa, aged 9

I don’t want to die and be a martyr, because when they’ve put me in my grave at the cemetery all the scorpions and snakes will come and bite me and eat me up.

The Abu Musa family will never forget the night of April 11, 2001. Just before midnight the Israeli army attacked the Khan Younis refugee camp with about twenty tanks and three bulldozers. The attackers left a cruel trail in their wake: two people dead, thirty wounded, thirty-five houses demolished, and 500 refugees now made homeless. In the space of just a few hours the Abu Musa family’s whole world had been brought crashing to the ground—not just the spacious house in which the family of sixteen lived. The family suffers from poverty and ill-health, both physical and mental. The children are particularly badly affected.

– “Granny, Granny!” the children shouted when the shells hit the house, and they all jumped up onto my arm, Sabah says. They all wanted to have room in my arms together. Little Muhammed, who was only one-and-a-half at the time, was completely hysterical. It was impossible to make him calm again, he went stiff as a poker and started shaking all over.

Muhammed had to spend three weeks in hospital. His father, Atta, is afraid that the boy has been mentally injured for life. Muhammed, who is now four years old, has violent mood swings, starts crying for the slightest reason, sleeps badly and wets the bed. When he is stressed he often starts flailing at everything and everybody.

As soon as Muhammed hears shooting he gets really distressed and starts crying and screaming, says his grandmother, Sabah. “I pick him up and hug him, and tell him not to be frightened”. After a while he calms down. He often falls asleep in my bed, he feels safe there.

After the house was demolished the large family was split up. UNRWA was unable to offer the family big enough accommodation for everyone, so the family was forced to divide itself in half, and now lives in two smaller houses. One of the buildings is not much more than a shed: the walls are dripping with damp, and the concrete floor feels ice-cold. Everyone sits on thin mattresses which are laid out along the walls in a hall which also doubles up as living-room and bedroom. Nobody in the family can remember when they were last able to sleep a whole night without being woken by the sound of shooting.
I wake my big brother up every night, says seven-year-old Huda. I’m not so scared of the shooting in the daytime, but at night it makes me really scared. ‘Sit up, sit up!’ I shout to Salem. I want him to sit up in his bed until the shooting stops. I don’t want him to sleep while they’re shooting. What if he got wounded while he was asleep! And I don’t like being alone when I hear the noise of the guns or other things exploding.

While Huda talks to me the adults find it hard to keep quiet and just listen. They too want to express what they feel. Everyone in the family seems to have a pent-up need to talk about their situation.

Everyday we’re made to endure things that no human being can live with for long, says Atta, Huda’s father. Israel can do with us what they want, we’re caught like mice in a cage. In every home you’ll find men with no work, nobody has any money. And everybody - relatives, friends, neighbours - is in the same boat. Sometimes I feel like all I want to do is bang my fists against the wall, smash something to pieces.

Before, we could at least go down to the beach in the evenings, adds grandfather Suleiman. It was a chance to relax. But at the start of the Intifada the Israeli army blocked off the road to the beach. Now it’s reserved for the Jewish settlers and their guests.

Huda’s big brother Salem is sitting next to his sister. He is the only one who lets Huda talk without interrupting. At nine years old he is one of the youngest people present, but his deep, brown eyes suggest the same kind of wisdom and melancholy as the eyes of a very old person.

Salem says that he does not mind being woken by Huda - she is, after all, his little sister:

When she cries, I comfort her and say, “Don’t be afraid, little sister, I’m here, I’ll take care of you.”

Salem can remember everything from the night their home was destroyed. Their father carried Huda, and he himself ran when they were forced to flee from their house. Now all his belongings are under the rubble. They were not able to save anything, clothes, toys or school-books. Ever since then he keeps his ears open for the loud engine-noise of bulldozers; it is a noise that scares him stiff. He is sure that the bulldozers will come back. In his mind’s eye Salem can clearly see what it will be like when their new home is also flattened.

First they’ll come and knock down the big houses at the bottom of the street, says Salem. Then they’ll bulldoze the little supermarket, and the other shops next to it. When those buildings have collapsed it’s our turn. We haven’t got a chance. The bulldozers will just keep coming towards us, house after house will be knocked down until there’s only our house left, and then they’ll knock our house down as well.
Salem tells me that he dreams a lot. Some of them are normal dreams, and nothing to worry about. Some, however, are frightening, and he wakes up sweating and with his heart thumping.

– I dream that a giant with a horrible light in his eyes is after me, Salem says. It looks like there’s lightning coming out of his eyes. I’m at school when he comes. I try to run away, but the giant catches up with me. I fall onto my back and he stamps on my stomach. Then he scratches me in the face with his long nails, and hits me.

– When I wake up it feels as if my face is all scratched. My heart is beating very fast, my chest goes up and down, I feel like my whole body is shaking. In the dream I shout out to my Dad: ‘Help me!’ but I don’t think he could have saved me. If he’d tried, we would both have died.

– I don’t want to die and be a martyr, says Salem and looks at us with his big, brown eyes, because when they’ve put me in my grave at the cemetery all the scorpions and snakes will come and bite me and eat me up.

Now Salem’s mother, Lubna, can’t cope with listening to him anymore. She starts laughing hysterically, and snatches the breast at which her youngest child, Hanin, has been drinking, out of the baby’s mouth.

– What are those stories you’re making up? she shouts out at Salem.

Atta tries to calm his young wife. Grandmother Sabah gives Salem a supportive pat. But Lubna’s outbreak has left a sombre mood in the room. In a corner, grandfather Suleiman sits quietly crying. Large tears roll down his cheeks.

– We’ve moved from place to place like birds, he says in a hollow voice. When will my family and I finally be left in peace?

Grandfather Suleiman grieves for his home.
Iman and her little brother Yasser search through the ruins.
Iman Abu Namos, aged 13

Dad was pleased when I found some tools for his car, he might be able to use them. But I can’t find my school-books, they were in the room where the roof’s caved in.

The nights in Khan Younis refugee camp in Gaza are broken up both by individual volleys of shots, and by the more prolonged rattling of machine-gun fire. Khan Younis is surrounded on three sides by Israeli military bases and a Jewish settlement which is also heavily armed.

One night the gun-fire is heavier than usual. Huge bursts of flame and smoke fly through the dark, from the Israeli military bases towards the housing area known as Toufah, The Apples. As day breaks, the destruction can be seen to be considerable. The Israeli army has told the press that six houses have been demolished, but the Palestinians count the heaps of rubble and reach a figure that is more than three times as many.

The residents of the area, who fled during the bombing, return and start looking through the debris of the demolished houses for their belongings. Three girls look out of a gaping hole in a two-storey house which has not collapsed completely. Sisters Iman, aged 13, Hanan, 10, and Rana, aged 9, help their father to look after the younger children and to search for anything that might have survived.

– We’re looking for clothes, kitchen things and toys, explains the oldest girl, Iman. We’ve found a lot of things, but they’re all broken. Dad was pleased when I found some tools for his car, he might be able to use them. But I can’t find my school-books, they were in the room where the roof’s caved in.

– My little brother Yasser is very upset, because we haven’t found any of his toys, Hanan continues. Dad gave him some new toys at Ramadan. And I’m helping my little sister Yussra to look for her Barbie dolls, but I can’t find them.

– I was very sad when I saw what has happened to our house, but I kept my tears back, says Iman. Instead, I was angry. I felt like I wanted to kill the Israelis.

This is not the first time the Abu Namos family’s house has been hit by artillery and shell fire. A year ago their house was so badly damaged that the family was forced to move to a flat in the centre of Khan Younis, and since then they’ve been living at two addresses: they have spent the daytime in their house, and because of the danger they have spent the nights in the rented flat.
When the soldiers started shooting at the house every night my parents decided we wouldn’t sleep here, explains Iman. But every morning Dad has driven us back to the house, we’ve eaten breakfast in the old kitchen and then we’ve gone to school. In the evenings, when it started to get dark, we drove back to the flat to eat dinner and sleep.

I have tried to keep as normal a life as possible going for my family, explains the children’s father, Muhammed Abu Namos. The whole situation has made the children very tense, they are ready for anything at all to happen, at any time at all. So I wanted them to feel that we were still living in our old house, and in that way they could keep going to their old school, and still play with their friends.

The family have owned the house since 1975, when Muhammed’s father bought it, and together, father and son started renovating the property. Up until 1996 Muhammed had a good income; he worked as a car mechanic in Israel.

I put all my money into the house, he says in a tone of resignation. Every shekel I could put aside I used to improve and extend the property. It benefited so many people - in addition to me, my wife and our seven children, my mother and my unmarried sisters also lived in the house. There were thirteen of us in all.

Today I drive a taxi to earn money for the absolute necessities. I’ll never be able to build such a house again. Where would I get the money? And even if I had the money, would I dare to build again? No, not without some kind of guarantee from Israel that they would leave the house in peace.

Muhammed Abu Namos says that he lives for his children. The most important thing for him is that things work out well for his six daughters and his only son, Yasser; but it is not easy being a parent in war-torn Gaza. After the events of last night the family have no choice but to give up their daytime visits to the house. Muhammed is worried for his children, who will now have to change to a different school, with new teachers and new friends. Since the Intifada started he has given his children as much of his time as possible. He knows they need a strong, reliable father, and he has no intention of letting them down.

I’m completely exhausted when I come home from work, but I always try to be there for the children, says Muhammed. I encourage them to tell me what their feelings are, to not be afraid of talking about their problems and things that worry them. If they have any problems, we’ll solve them together. I don’t give up easily, that’s one thing my children can always rely on.
Support groups help girls to deal with their fear

Inside the door to the school library in Khan Younis fourteen pairs of shoes are lined up neatly on the floor. The girls whose shoes they are are sitting in a circle, talking about what it was like when they lost their homes.

Studies carried out by the non-governmental organisation “Gaza Community Mental Health Programme” on the mental health of children in southern Gaza, show that more girls than boys are traumatised by the conflict. It is also the case that girls’ crisis symptoms are different from boys’: while boys often become aggressive and hyperactive, many girls turn their fear and anxiety inwards and develop feelings of loneliness.

By being involved in support groups at school, the girls have the opportunity to talk about what they’ve been through and to express their thoughts and feelings. The aim is to build up their self-confidence and help them to deal with their fear.
Karima, aged 12:
– Nobody had warned us that the building was going to be demolished. Suddenly the air exploded with machine guns and tear-gas. We tried to take cover as far inside the building as we could, but we couldn’t find any good place to hide. When the helicopters started attacking us from above as well, then I felt that I lost all hope. I was scared like anything. Then the soldiers broke into the house, grabbed hold of us and shouted: ‘Get out, get away from here!’ A few hours later we drummed up the courage to go back to the house, and we saw they’d completely demolished it.

Lamis, aged 12:
– When we heard the shooting my Dad said: ‘Don’t worry, nothing’s going to happen to us.’ But the Israeli tanks started shelling our house and all the neighbours’ houses. We were forced to run away. A lot of houses were destroyed that night. We didn’t go to school the next day. We were so sad, we felt like we’d lost everything. I’m afraid it’ll happen again.

Reeham, aged 12:
– We were just about to go to bed when we heard shooting and bombs exploding outside the house. My dad tried to calm us down, but everyone was crying, and shouting hysterically. Suddenly we saw that my little sister had been hit in the foot by a piece of shell. At that moment I didn’t think any of us would survive, but we did. The neighbours’ house was completely wrecked. Ours was damaged, but we still live in it.

Nisreen, aged 12:
– We were sitting watching television when a missile hit the water-tank on the roof. We all ran out into the alley for safety. My dad and my brother hurried up onto the roof to check the tank. I was so frightened that I fainted. When I came to I saw that my little sister wasn’t with us. She’s only three, and we’d left her in the living room! I ran back in and got her. She was all right, but I still feel guilty about forgetting her. Now, it’s as if I feel scared all the time.

Hanadi, aged 11:
– I didn’t go to school for a week after they knocked our house down. Now I’m always scared all the time. It’s unfair that me and my friends have to be so scared. Children in other countries can feel safe in their own homes. Why can’t we? And it never ends: last week we had a missile hit the bedroom. Me and my brothers and sisters were in the next room. We had to wait till the soldiers were gone before we could help my father. The room was wrecked, but Dad will be all right again.
Support group in Khan Younis.
– Once, I saw an ambulance that came to get a boy who’d been shot. But they forgot to take his leg with them, they left it on the ground. After a while the ambulance came back to pick up the leg.
Muhammed Abu Libde, aged 13

The shooting and the noise of the bulldozer engines woke me up. We didn’t know where we could go. My little sister screamed and cried the whole time. We were all crying, we were scared to death.

Every afternoon fear digs its claws into mother-of-four Faiza Abu Libde. Her son Bilal, aged 8, and her daughter Wala’a, who is 10, come home from school as usual, but Muhammed, who is nearly 13, seldom turns up before nightfall. And if he does happen to go straight home after school, it’s only to throw his school-books in through the door before he quickly escapes from his mother and his homework and heads off to the war zone in Rafah. He knows that it is dangerous and that he is putting his life at risk. But although Muhammed cannot explain exactly why he is drawn there, he just feels that he has to go.

– I know that I might get wounded, says Muhammed, and I know that Mum is worried about me, Dad too. I don’t want them to be worried, I really don’t. But I go there anyway, I want to see for myself what is happening down at the border.

The area that pulls Muhammed like a magnet is situated along the border between Gaza and Egypt. The border is heavily guarded by Israeli soldiers. Israel has built a 43-foot high iron barrier along Gaza’s southern border, which casts its shadow over Rafah’s refugee camp. High up in the watch-towers the sentries sit with their machine guns, their eyes moving over the camp. The Israelis have knocked down the first rows of houses: since the Intifada, the Palestinian uprising against the occupation, started in 2000 something like 400 Palestinian homes have been turned into an open stretch of gravel and stones.

The house where Muhammed grew up no longer exists either. The Abu Libde family’s home was pulverised by the Israeli bulldozers one night two years ago. It was a night of fear. Muhammed had never been as afraid as that before in his life. It is a feeling he is familiar with now, since it resembles the fear that grips him whenever he is down near the border.

– I can feel my heart beating, thumping in my chest, says Muhammed, and my breathing gets quicker.
Terrible things happen down by the border. Muhammed often witnesses stone-throwing youngsters getting injured, he sees how the Israeli bullets hit arms and legs, sometimes an unprotected head. He will never let his little brother Bilal go with him, not even when Bilal is older - and not just because it is a dangerous place; he also thinks the sight of mutilated people is not something he wants his brother to see.

– Once, I saw an ambulance that came to get a boy who’d been shot, Muhammed recalls. But they forgot to take his leg with them, they left it on the ground. After a while the ambulance came back to pick up the leg.

Khalil Abu Libde, Muhammed’s father, has been sitting and listening without a word to what his son has to say, but now he can no longer keep himself from joining the conversation. Khalil is unable to hide how upset he is at his son risking his life in the area known as ‘Death’s Door’. If he could, he would stop Muhammed going there, or go to collect him from school every afternoon. But Khalil cannot walk without crutches: he lost his left leg three years ago. It was ripped off by a piece of shell while he was asleep in bed. When he lost his leg, Khalil also lost his authority. He no longer has any strength to back up his words, even when those words are trembling with rage.

– Are you mad? Khalil shouts at his son. What’s the matter with you? Do you want to get killed?

– Is it better sitting on a chair in here while people are dying out there? Muhammed snaps back in a contemptuous tone clearly addressed at his father’s disability. At least I can help the kids who get wounded, and make sure the ambulance reaches them.

– And it wouldn’t bother me if I got killed, Muhammed continues, just as defiantly. This isn’t any kind of life anyway. It’d be better to die and be a martyr.

Muhammed’s mother Faiza sighs heavily. She is sitting with her youngest child on one of the thin mattresses on the floor. The rows between father and son are trying. She realises that both of them are suffering, and understands that their stress and anxiety are a result of the helplessness felt by all those who are victims of the daily violence in Rafah.

– It affects everyone in the family, says Faiza. It hit us all when we lost our home. When our house was demolished it turned our world upside down. Before that, we were a normal family, everyone was all right.

Nobody in the family can forget the dreadful night when they were forced to flee from their home. It was 10 January, 2002. At two o’clock in the morning the Israeli army drove into the refugee camp with tanks and bulldozers. No prior warning had been given: the attack was completely unexpected.
– We were asleep in bed, Muhammed remembers. The shooting and the noise of the bulldozer engines woke me up. They were shooting at us from the watch-towers, it was terrible. I hid behind the bed together with Bilal and my sisters. We didn’t know where we could go. My little sister screamed and cried the whole time. We were all crying, we were scared to death. I remember that I thought, ‘Now it’s our turn, now the Israeli soldiers have come to destroy our home.’ I’d seen them doing it on TV.

As the bulldozers got closer to their house, the family was seized with panic; if they left the house they risked being hit by the bullets and shells that were raining down over the neighbourhood, and if they stayed where they were, they were likely to be crushed under the roof and walls. The situation was exacerbated by Khalil’s disability - he had lost his leg only four months earlier, and was only just able to drag himself around using his new crutches. Their plight was desperate, but at the last minute some of their neighbours managed to get to the house to help them. At the same moment as the bulldozer crashed into the building and knocked a huge hole in the wall, the family fled out into the night.

– We didn’t get a chance to take anything with us, Khalil says. It was a cold night, and freezing rain was pouring down so we got drenched. We were wearing our pyjamas, we didn’t even have time to put anything on our feet.

On that cold winter night sixty or so Palestinian homes were razed to the ground. The attack on the refugee camp was Israel’s retaliation for the killing of four Israeli soldiers by Palestinian resistance fighters. When the dust had settled and it was possible to quantify the destruction wreaked in the camp, it was seen that about 700 people, 300 of them children, had been made homeless.

In the initial period after being made homeless the Abu Libde family lived in a Red Cross tent. They now rent a flat with the help of UNRWA, and hope that they will soon be able to move into one of the houses that UNRWA has promised to build. Faiza is convinced that all of them would feel better if they had the chance to put down new roots, in a home of their own. In their temporary rented accommodation, situated barely 500 yards from the low-intensity war which never takes a break, the family is constantly being reminded of what happened.

– We are woken every night by the noise of shooting, explains Faiza. Sometimes I hear Bilal crying out in his sleep, ‘They’re bombing us, they’re bombing us’. And the worry and stress when the shooting starts make Muhammed physically ill. He’s afraid that the Israelis are going to come and knock down this house as well, and that they’ll do it while we’re asleep in bed.
Ala’a and Rujana, the courageous cat.
**Ala’a Hamad, aged 12**

We have a suitcase that is always packed and ready, in case we need to leave the house in a hurry. Sometimes the Israeli soldiers shout through their megaphones that we are to leave the building.

The long street is eerily deserted and silent. A dead rat lies in the ooze of mud and old rubbish. None of the shops is open anymore, the metal shutters that have been drawn down to cover the windows are locked into the pavement with heavy padlocks. The buildings have been hit by bullets and shells; the walls are perforated with holes that gape black against the sky.

For over three years the refugee camp in Rafah has been constantly exposed to attacks by the Israeli army. Between the damaged buildings you can glimpse the 43-foot high iron barrier which Israel has built along the border between Gaza and Egypt. In front of the wall there is a broad belt of demolished houses, smashed to rubble by the military’s bulldozers. Heavily armed Israeli soldiers maintain surveillance over the area from tall watch-towers.

The few residents still living in this neighbourhood do not know how much longer they will have a roof over their heads; their houses could be demolished at any time. Twelve-year-old Ala’a Hamad lives at the end of the street; his family cannot afford to move to a safer part of Rafah, they are forced to stay here at Bab Salah Eddin, the area Palestinians call “Death’s Door”.

The Hamad family live in a simple two-storey house. Ala’a’s mother, Shadia, has put an old towel out on the steps, for people to wipe the mud from the alley off their shoes before entering the house. Everything in the neighbourhood is delapidated and decaying, but Shadia refuses to give up. It would be hard to find cleaner steps than these anywhere in the camp. For Shadia it is a matter of pride that her home and her children should be clean and well cared-for. And her care is not confined to surface matters: when she noticed that Ala’a was starting to develop problems which she and her husband, Abdel Karim, were unable to deal with she asked the school for help, and now their son is involved in a support group and also receives individual therapy. Many Palestinian parents would never admit that their children had psychological problems, let alone seek help from a psychologist; but Shadia is grateful for the help that is available:

– I daren’t think what would happen if Ala’a didn’t have somebody whom he can talk to about his problems, says Shadia. He might end up like one of
the mad people down there on the street. I know those people, they weren’t ill before. The war has made them ill, and now they can only bear to live in their own little world.

Ala’a and the rest of his family - his father Abdel Karim and his brothers and sisters, Maha, who is 16, Bara’a, aged 10, Karam, aged 5 and little Hala, who is two-and-a-half - are waiting in the living room on the upper floor. At the far end of the room there is a basic kitchen behind a waist-high wall. The furniture in the room consists of a bed, two plastic chairs and a sagging old sofa which is placed under a large window affording a view over the field of ruins, the barrier and the tall watch-towers. A piece of fibreboard fills half the window, to prevent the soldiers in the watch-tower from having an unimpeded view straight into the room - although it cannot do anything to keep out the bullets. The family recently had the walls repaired, because the wind blew straight in through the bullet-holes, but nobody expects the freshly-painted walls to remain white for very long. Almost every night new holes are made as the bullets burrow their way into the walls.

– Before, we used to spend nearly all our time in this room, says Shadia, but now we don’t dare to be in here, or in the next room, which is our bedroom. These days we’re mostly in the room on the bottom floor without a window, we have a load of mattresses in there which we spread out on the floor when it’s time to go to bed.

There is no kitchen on the ground floor; Shadia still has to cook the family’s meals upstairs in the living room.

– I’m often scared while I’m doing the cooking, Shadia continues. Sometimes I have to crouch down and take cover from the bullets. I often have to serve something simple, sometimes just bread and vegetables.

Ala’a is sitting on the bed, playing with a ginger cat. His younger brothers and sisters are jumping up and down on the sofa in front of the window that looks out onto the Israeli watch-towers. Their mother explains that it’s morning, and the mornings are usually quiet. Ala’a looks sleepy; last night’s shooting kept him awake until dawn.

– When I wake up I’m so tired, really tired, says Ala’a giving a wide yawn. I can’t sleep when the soldiers are shooting. They’re always hitting our house. When I get too scared I go and get into Dad’s bed.

His little brother Karam is sitting on the floor holding two green toy tanks in his hands, ready to mow down a house he’s built of tape cassettes. The residents of the house, a lion and a little rabbit, are up on the roof, waiting for the attack.

– We have a suitcase that is always packed and ready, in case we need to leave the house in a hurry, Ala’a continues. Sometimes the Israeli soldiers shout through their megaphones that we are to leave the building. One night
we had to get out and run to my uncle’s house, and on the way there I suddenly felt that I couldn’t move my legs. Ever since then my legs have hurt. They ache most when I’m scared at night.

His mother Shadia adds that none of her other children react as strongly to the night-time shooting as Ala’a. Everyone in the family feels afraid, and the youngest children cry, but Ala’a is so terrified that he loses control over his body. He often has nightmares when he’s witnessed something frightening, and some of his bad dreams recur night after night. Once, Ala’a saw a dead body being lifted into an ambulance without its head. Now that headless person often appears in his nightmares. In another terrible dream Ala’a is being hunted by Israeli fighting dogs. This is something he has actually experienced once when he was out buying sweets for Karam:

– The dog went for me when I was on my way to the shop round the corner, Ala’a recounts. I often see it running loose around the area. It isn’t just any dog, I’ve been told it eats people. I can’t say in words how terrified I was; every time I tried to run away from it, it jumped up at me. Mum tells me that I scream in my sleep when I dream about the dog.

Karam, playing on the floor, has been helped by his sister Bara’a to rebuild the demolished cassette house, only to start up his tanks the next minute and knock it down again. He repeats the game compulsively, again and again. Ala’a watches, without wanting to join in. He prefers to keep stroking the playful cat. It is not common to find pets in Palestinian homes, but Rujuna is treated as one of the family.

– It was me who named her, says Ala’a with pride in his voice. I don’t know what Rujuna means, but I think it sounds beautiful, like a French name. She’s the best cat in the world. Once I saw out of the window that she was being chased through the ruins by the soldiers’ dog, but Rujuna fooled him! She was much cleverer than that stupid dog.
Boys’ feelings deserve respect

In Rafah’s biggest comprehensive school, it is time for the change-over between the morning shift and the afternoon shift. A total of 3,500 boys attend the school, which is run by UNRWA. The schoolyard is buzzing like a beehive with the thousands of children, until the bell goes and it is time for silence to reign again in the many classrooms.

In the library, the school welfare officer Imad Al Nator has brought together a number of boys for a support group session.

– The children need all the support we adults can give them, says Imad, who leads a dozen such support groups at the school. The most important thing is to give them the opportunity to express their feelings. Palestinian society is not always very good at listening to its children, but here, we teach the children that their thoughts and feelings deserve our respect.

Imad Al Nator is the school’s only welfare officer. The post of welfare officer is not a permanent position; it is part of an UNRWA project for schoolchildren in southern Gaza, aimed at strengthening their mental health. Working by himself, Imad is supposed to manage to provide support and guidance to 3,500 boys. It is an impossible task.

– It hurts me that there are so many children who are not getting any help at all.
It worries Imad that next term, the schoolchildren will not get any help from UNRWA. Despite the fact that the project is being run with inadequate resources, it has been very valuable for those pupils who have taken part in the discussion groups.

“I’ve seen very positive development in the boys I’ve been meeting over a period of almost three years, says Imad. They’ve learnt to deal with their aggression, to channel their energy into games and sport instead. Sometimes we use dramatherapy as well. I think the boys have become much more open, they’ll take care of each other now, support each other. Another effect is that they concentrate much better on their schoolwork, a lot of them help each other with their homework and almost all of them have started getting higher marks.”

Sherif, aged 12:
“The bulldozer drove right into our house. We fled to my uncle’s house. That was the second time we’ve had to get out as quick as we can in the middle of the night. On the way to my uncle’s house it felt like my legs didn’t want to do what I wanted them to anymore, and I suddenly couldn’t move. It felt like I was paralysed. Afterwards, I couldn’t sleep for three days, and then I slept for a whole day.”

Ahmed, aged 6:
Ahmed is the youngest boy in the group. His legs do not reach to the floor. For a long time he sits there listening to the other boys. Suddenly he starts crying, in a quiet way that is hardly noticeable. Everyone knows that Ahmed lost his father last week. But he does not want to talk about it; not when everyone is listening to him, not yet.

Saleh, aged 12:
“My sister was killed when they bombed our house. It was in the middle of the summer, early in the afternoon. We were sleeping on our mattresses in the living-room because it was such a hot day. The bang woke me up and I got up from the floor. Just then I saw my sister, and felt my legs give way. She’d been hit in the face, there was nothing left of her face.”

Assadin, aged 10:
“I sit in the classroom, but it feels as if I’m not really there. I can’t concentrate, I just sit there the whole time, thinking of my brother. He was shot to death down at Bab Salah Eddin. I was good at school before my brother was killed, but now I just forget everything I’ve learned, it’s as if it just won’t stay in my head.”
Rana, aged 9, Hanan, 10, and Iman, aged 13 - in what remains of their home.
Demolition of houses is against international law

The destruction of homes and property to which Palestinian children and their families are subjected represents a serious violation of international law. International law includes the international human rights conventions, of which the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is one, and humanitarian law, which concerns the protection of non-combatants in times of war.

Israel maintains that the conventions on human rights, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and certain parts of humanitarian law do not apply in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, because the territories are not part of the state of Israel; instead, they say, the responsibility rests with the Palestinian Authority. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child does not accept this reasoning, and when Israel submitted their national report, the Committee instructed the Israeli government to start applying the Convention in the Palestinian territories.

Human Rights

In this context, the most important protective rules in the various UN conventions relating to human rights are to be found in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The former establishes a fundamental rule, in Article 11, relating to every person’s right to a decent standard of living and accommodation:

“The States Parties to the present Covenant recognise the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.”

The CRC establishes a number of rights which can be seen to protect children against the destruction of their homes. The destruction of a child’s home violates the right to life and development, to a home and a private life, to a decent standard of living, to protection and care in times of armed conflict, to the physical and mental rehabilitation required after exposure to armed conflict, and is a threat to the right to health and education, to recreation and play, and to participation. The most relevant provisions in this regard are made in the following articles:

Article 6:

“States Parties recognise that every child has the inherent right to life”.

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“States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.”

**Article 16:**

“No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation.”

**Article 27:**

“States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.”

**Article 38:**

“In accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population in armed conflicts, States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict.”

**Article 39:**

“States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts.”

**International Humanitarian Law**

Israel has signed the Fourth Geneva Convention relating to the protection of civilians in times of war. This convention is part of international humanitarian law (the laws governing the protection of non-combatants in times of war, also known as the “laws of war”). Humanitarian law governs, among other things, the responsibilities of an occupying power. Israel is thus bound by the terms of the Fourth Geneva Convention, and as an occupying power has the responsibility of protecting the non-combatant Palestinian population and of safeguarding its safety and welfare. Among the requirements laid down is the obligation to protect the civilian population’s property (Article 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention from 1949, and Article 46 of the Hague Convention from 1907). Israel’s duty to apply the Fourth Geneva Convention in the Occupied Palestinian Territories was confirmed by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in a statement made in 2001.

Exceptions from the obligation to protect the civilian population can only be made on grounds of serious concern for military security. However, the level of
proof required to demonstrate that military security is under threat is very high, and if a state cannot show that there are sufficient grounds, then extensive destruction of private property is to be considered as a serious breach of the convention.

Israel’s right to self-defence and military security is recognised by governments, the UN Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and also by NGOs such as Amnesty International, the Israeli B’Tselem and the Palestinian Al Haq. That being said, these actors adjudge that there has not been a sufficient threat to military security to justify the demolition of houses that has taken place since 2000: the level of destruction is not proportionate to the military advantage gained. The destruction has had unreasonable consequences for the Palestinian families and their children whose homes and property have been destroyed without them themselves having been guilty of any acts of violence towards Israel. According to the ICRC, Israel’s actions therefore represent a serious violation of international humanitarian law.

The prohibition of collective punishment is a further fundamental rule of international law: individuals may only be punished for actions they themselves have committed. Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits the collective punishment of civilians in occupied areas:

“No protected person may be punished for an offence he or she has not personally committed. Collective penalties and likewise all measures of intimidation or of terrorism are prohibited.”

The destruction of homes and property which the Israeli army repeatedly carries out often causes suffering for civilian Palestinians who have not themselves committed any violent acts. The ICRC, the UN Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Amnesty International and a number of other NGOs have therefore called attention to the fact that Israel is in breach of the prohibition, enshrined in international humanitarian law, of collective punishment which affects civilians who have not themselves committed any criminal acts.
Homeless woman in Khan Younis.
Jenin, Khan Younis and Rafah

The children interviewed in this report come from three different areas on the West Bank and in Gaza Strip:

The refugee camp at Jenin: After an escalation in the violence from both sides, in 2000 Israel launched a military offensive against Palestinian cities and refugee camps on the West Bank. As part of this offensive, in April 2000 the Israeli army invaded the Jenin refugee camp in the north of the West Bank. A whole neighbourhood was razed to the ground, as were many other buildings in other parts of the camp. Approximately 800 families had their houses demolished, with 4000 people being made homeless.

Since then, many more houses have also been destroyed in Jenin, and at several other locations on the West Bank.

The Khan Younis refugee camp is located in the Gaza Strip. The camp is surrounded on three sides by Israeli military bases and settlements, and as a result of its exposed location it has seen large-scale destruction of houses. Over 400 houses in Khan Younis have been knocked down since the beginning of the Intifada in 2000, and according to UNRWA approximately 3500 of the camp’s residents have been made homeless.

The Rafah refugee camp in southern Gaza Strip is on the border with Egypt. Since the beginning of the Intifada 1200 houses have been destroyed and approximately 12,700 people made homeless. Rafah is one of the hardest-hit areas in terms of house demolitions because it is right next to the border, and Israel claims that there are tunnels between the houses in the camp and Egypt which are used for smuggling weapons. Israel also claims that certain houses in Rafah are used as bases for military attacks against Israel and against Israeli settlements and military bases in Gaza Strip.

In May 2004 the Israeli army intensified its destruction of houses in Rafah, and in just two days over 1000 more people were made homeless. Israel defended these actions by saying they wanted to stop the smuggling of weapons and the Palestinian attacks. The UN and other international organisations called on Israel to stop the demolition of houses since it could not be justified on the basis of Israel’s need for self-defence, and therefore contravenes international law on that point - as well as being an act of collective punishment.

Save the Children Sweden, in a letter to the Swedish government, demanded that it should act to influence Israel as an occupying power to protect the civilian
population and discontinue its destruction of people’s homes. In a reply, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Laila Freivalds, answered that she had criticised the destruction of houses at meetings she had had with the Israeli prime minister and other leading politicians in the course of a visit to Israel in June.

Together with forty or so other international organisations which are active on the West Bank and in Gaza Strip, Save the Children also issued a demand for Israel to stop demolishing houses immediately.
Israel’s motives for demolishing houses

Military Security

The Israeli army primarily cites military security as its grounds for destroying houses. The army claims that the houses are being used by armed Palestinian men as bases from which they attack soldiers and settlers, or conceal arms caches or secret tunnels used for smuggling weapons. Another motive given is that the houses belong to the families of suicide bombers or other Palestinians who have committed acts of violence against Israel. The houses are destroyed as a punishment, and to deter others from committing similar acts. On the subject of collective punishment, see the section “Demolition of houses is against international law”, above.

Absence of planning permission

Many of the houses on the West Bank and in Gaza Strip have been built without planning permission. For Palestinians living in these areas it is almost impossible to obtain permission, so a lot of people build their houses even though they have not been issued with a permit by the Israeli authorities.

UNRWA

UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) was set up after the war that broke out between Israel and the surrounding Arab countries in connection with the founding of Israel in 1948. One effect of the war was that many Palestinians fled from their homes in what became the state of Israel, and UNRWA was founded to help the refugees with food, health care, etc.

Now - fifty-five years on - UNRWA is still providing health care, basic education and social services for 4.1 million Palestinian refugees. UNRWA only defines as refugees those Palestinians who fled from their homes in connection with the 1948 war and were registered at that time as refugees, together with the children and grandchildren of these people. Large numbers of refugees who are not registered or who fled their homes at a later date are therefore left without assistance.

A large proportion of the Palestinians on the West Bank and in Gaza Strip who have had their homes demolished by the Israeli army are registered refugees and still live in refugee camps; consequently UNRWA helps them with temporary accommodation and, in certain cases, with food and psychosocial support. UNRWA works to build new homes for those whose houses have been destroyed, but the organisation’s budget is not large enough to meet the needs of all the refugees who have been made homeless. 93 per cent of UNRWA’s funding comes from voluntary donations from the European Union and other countries around the world, including Sweden. In recent years UNRWA has organised campaigns to raise extra money to cover the ever-increasing needs.
Save the Children Sweden on the West Bank and in Gaza Strip

Together with Palestinian NGOs active on the West Bank and in Gaza, Save the Children works to protect and promote the rights of Palestinian children in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Children are being hit hard by the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. In the last four years 551 Palestinian children and 104 Israeli children have been killed, and thousands of Palestinian and Israeli children have been injured, as a result of events relating to the conflict. A large proportion of the Palestinian children living on the West Bank and in Gaza Strip are forced to experience violence and unrest as part of their everyday lives. Curfews, restrictions to their freedom of movement and attacks from the Israeli army lead to them feeling threatened and insecure. As a result of the conflict the Palestinian children are also denied their right to education, health care, and recreation and development in a safe environment. In addition, over sixty per cent of the Palestinian population are living below the UN poverty line.

Save the Children Sweden has therefore initiated the establishment of a network where Palestinian organisations work together with Save the Children Sweden to promote children’s rights. By providing training and education and organising seminars, Save the Children Sweden is endeavouring to mobilise the community and provide civil Palestinian society with tools for supporting and protecting its children in difficult situations - such as when children have had their homes demolished. Representatives of the Palestinian Authority are also being given training in how they can apply a children’s rights perspective even in the most demanding of crisis situations.

The work of Save the Children Sweden also includes informing children themselves about their rights, using games, discussions and other activities. Within the framework of these initiatives, the children are also given the opportunity to make their voices heard and influence their own situation through discussions with parents, teachers and decision-makers. We place special emphasis on participation for girls.

Save the Children Sweden supports Palestinian children held in Israeli military detention centres and prisons by providing them with legal aid and making sure they can receive visitors. These measures are combined with lobbying efforts at national and international level in order to call attention to the fact that such treatment of children is a severe violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Save the Children Sweden also carries out advocacy work at international and national level. At international level, Save the Children works to influence the UN, the EU and the Swedish government to persuade Israel to apply international
law, including the CRC, in the Occupied Territories, on the West Bank and in Gaza Strip. We have published a number of reports in which Palestinian children themselves have described their situation and said how they would like to see it improved. At national level, we work to influence the Palestinian Authority to do all it can to ensure respect for the rights of Palestinian children.
Save the Children Sweden demands:

- That the international community put pressure on Israel to meet its obligations under the terms of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other embodiments of international law; and especially that pressure be brought to bear on Israel to stop destroying Palestinian houses.

- That the international community work to have international human rights monitors sent to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, their tasks to include reporting on the destruction of houses. Among the monitors there should be persons especially instructed to monitor children’s rights.

- That the government of Israel respect and apply the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the West Bank and in Gaza Strip, and that it fulfil its international obligations as established in international law.

- That the government of Israel immediately discontinue all destruction of Palestinian houses, since such action contravenes international law and represents collective punishment of the Palestinian civilian population.

- That the government of Israel guarantee Palestinian children their right to an adequate standard of living that meets their needs for development.

- That the Palestinian Authority do everything in its power to ensure that children whose homes are demolished are able as soon as possible to resume as normal a life as possible, in which their rights to education, health care, and play and recreation are respected.
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Save the Children Sweden fights for children’s rights. We deliver immediate and lasting improvements to children’s lives worldwide.