

# A lifetime of suffering

## *The challenges faced by older people in Gaza*

### Key Messages

- **An immediate ceasefire and full, safe, and unimpeded humanitarian access are critical to ensure that all affected people can be reached and can receive urgently needed basic services and assistance.**
- **The unconditional release of all hostages must take place immediately. While they continue to be held hostage, access should be granted for the delivery of necessary medical treatment, particularly for older hostages who have pre-existing health conditions.**
- **The approximately 111,500 older people in Gaza are among the most at risk of hunger, dehydration, illness, injury, and death.**
- **Older people in Gaza were already living with the long-term impact of conflict and displacement, with reduced access to essential health and social services.**
- **Older people develop resilience, coping skills and capacities over the course of conflicts which enable them to play valuable roles within their communities; however, in Gaza they are being pushed to their limit.**
- **Despite evacuation orders to move to “safer” areas, older people may be unwilling or unable to move from their homes or local areas.**
- **Emergency shelters are not designed to accommodate the huge numbers of people now staying in them and are inadequate to meet the needs of older people, many of whom may require support to manage chronic health issues and disabilities.**
- **Violence against women has no age limit. For women of all ages on the move and living in the emergency shelters, there is an increased risk of violence, exploitation, and abuse.**
- **Older people are disproportionately affected by non-communicable diseases. With hospitals damaged and medication in short supply, they are likely to be severely impacted.**
- **As the population in Gaza faces crisis levels of hunger, accessing food will be extremely challenging for older people, with older women in particular facing security and protection related obstacles.**

### Overview

**On 7 October 2023, armed groups in Gaza launched a coordinated attack on Israel. This led to a dramatic escalation of the ongoing crisis, which has been characterised by 75 years of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Gaza blockade, and recurrent escalations of hostilities between Israeli security forces and Palestinian armed groups.**

The Hamas-led attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023 resulted in around 1,200 people being killed and an estimated 240 being taken hostage. Around 136 people are still held

hostage and their whereabouts is unknown. The speed and scale of the response by the Israeli Defence Force has left thousands of people dead and injured in Gaza. As of 7 February 2024, at least 27,708 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza and 67,147 injured, according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza. The indiscriminate firing of rockets from Gaza into Israel has also continued<sup>1</sup>.

### Timeline of events

- The Israeli government announced a total siege on Gaza on 9 October, forbidding the movement of supplies into the territory, including much-needed aid supplies.
- This was followed on 13 October by a command for all civilians to evacuate northern Gaza.
- Humanitarian and human rights groups and United Nations officials repeatedly called for an immediate ceasefire<sup>2</sup> and expressed fears that Gaza is now uninhabitable<sup>3</sup>.
- On 28 October, Israel launched a ground attack.
- On 12 December, 153 UN Member States adopted a resolution, demanding an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, the rapid and unconditional release of all hostages and to ensure humanitarian access to the Gaza Strip.
- On 21 December, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification indicated that the whole population of Gaza is now in IPC Phase 3 or above (Crisis or worse) levels of acute food insecurity<sup>4</sup>; in January, UN agencies stated that "pockets of famine" already existed in the territory<sup>5</sup>.
- As of 13 January 2024, 1.9 million people, or nearly 85 per cent of Gaza's population, were estimated to be internally displaced, including many who have been displaced multiple times since 7 October 2023, as families are forced to move repeatedly in search of safety. Significant population movements towards the south continue<sup>6</sup>.
- On 26 January 2024, the International Court of Justice made a decision to order provisional measures regarding Israel's alleged violations in the Gaza Strip of obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, including to "enable the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance to address the adverse conditions of life faced by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip"<sup>7</sup>.
- The following day, allegations were made that several United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) staff members had been involved in the attacks on Israel on 7 October; UNRWA fired nine of the 12 accused employees and opened an investigation.
- As a result of the allegations, a number of donor countries paused funding to UNRWA; if funding is not resumed, UNRWA have said they would be unable to continue operations in Gaza and across the region beyond the end of February 2024<sup>8</sup>.

### Population profile

As of mid-2023, the population of Palestine was estimated to be approximately 5.48 million, with roughly 2.23 million in Gaza and 3.25 million in the West Bank<sup>9</sup>. Prior to October 2023, an estimated 2.1 million Palestinians across the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) required humanitarian assistance, representing 58 per cent of the residents of Gaza and one quarter of West Bank residents<sup>10</sup>. Older people made up approximately five per cent of the population in Gaza<sup>11</sup> and six per cent of the population in the West Bank<sup>12</sup>.

Older people in Gaza were already living with the long-term impact of conflict and displacement, with reduced access to essential health and social services. Data collected by El-Wedad Society for Community Rehabilitation and HelpAge International in 2021 indicated that 97 per cent of older people in Gaza had at least one health condition and 86 per cent had at least one disability, while 78 per cent reported that they felt anxious all, or most, of the time<sup>13</sup>. Nearly 27 per cent of older Palestinians lived in poverty, with significantly higher deprivation in the Gaza strip (47 per cent)<sup>14</sup>.

## Situation of Older People

Due to ongoing insecurity, attacks on aid convoys, destruction of facilities and civilian infrastructure, and cutting off or limiting of communications, electricity, and fuel, it is extremely challenging to fully assess the needs of the population in Gaza, particularly in the north which is virtually cut off from support. It is often difficult to get a full picture of the circumstances of older people in humanitarian crises as they are frequently overlooked<sup>15</sup>; in this context, it is almost impossible. However, based on the information coming out of Gaza and HelpAge's experience of working with older people in conflict settings, it is clear that older people are facing particularly dire circumstances, with specific risks to their health and wellbeing.

### Risk of death and injury

Older people who have remained in their homes, shelters, or hospitals in areas of intense fighting face a high risk of being killed or injured, and are likely to have difficulty accessing shelter, as well as essential supplies and services. There is no clear data on how many older people have been killed in Gaza since 7 October 2023. However, with the bare minimum of supplies crossing the border and the relentless bombing and resulting displacement, the approximately 111,500 older people in Gaza are among those most at risk of hunger, dehydration, illness, injury, and death.

In the first 19 days of the conflict, it was reported that older people made up 8.6 per cent of fatalities<sup>16</sup>. By 22 December, reports indicated that 1,049 older people had been killed, about 3.9 per cent of all Palestinian deaths; the majority of them were killed under the debris of their homes or in shelters following airstrikes, though some were "targeted in killings and field executions"<sup>17</sup>.

### Unwilling or unable to move

Despite the evacuation order of 13 October, and subsequent orders to move to ever dwindling "safer" areas, it is clear from other crises that older people, especially those with disabilities, are often unwilling or unable to move from their homes or local areas<sup>18</sup>.

The greater prevalence of chronic conditions among older people, including multi-morbidity, cognitive impairments, and mobility issues, can make it harder for them to evacuate or move away from danger. They are also more likely to depend on assistive products, including mobility aids such as wheelchairs or walkers, and need support from caregivers than others<sup>19</sup>. Limited technological literacy<sup>20</sup> can mean that they often lack access to information that is circulated online. In addition, the long-standing emotional connections to their homes or land can mean that they chose not to move far<sup>21</sup>. HelpAge partner, Juzoor, is supporting shelters in Gaza hosting more than 200,000 displaced people<sup>22</sup>; in late October 2023, they were providing support to more than 3,000 older people living in shelters in the northern region of Gaza, 70 per cent of whom were lacking access to essential medications for chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease<sup>23</sup>.

### Difficult journeys and unsafe shelters

Evacuating to emergency shelters and/or to other areas in Gaza can be gruelling<sup>24</sup> – particularly for older people who may face challenges in managing a journey that often takes more than a day in over-crowded vehicles or on foot, while dodging airstrikes and navigating areas decimated by the bombing<sup>25</sup>. Gazans are being squeezed into small areas of land that are designated as "safe", but which cannot sustain human life and are at risk of airstrikes<sup>26</sup>.

Many older people are moving to emergency shelters, such as former UNRWA schools, but these shelters are not designed to accommodate the huge numbers of people staying in them and are inadequate to meet the needs of older people, especially those with disabilities who struggle with limited accessibility, loss, or damage to assistive devices, overcrowding and lack of privacy. The recurring electricity blackouts also

present security risks and impede movement<sup>27</sup>. The possibility to live independently and have their voices heard is destroyed<sup>28</sup>.

Overcrowding in the shelters, and lack of access to safe and adequate water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities and supplies for the management of incontinence can greatly impact the ability of older people and others living with incontinence to live with dignity and can negatively affect their mental and physical health<sup>29</sup>.

Older women often face violence, abuse and neglect because of their age, gender, or other factors such as disability or being a widow. Prior to October 2023, about 8 per cent of older people reported being exposed to violence by a family member, with older women more at risk than older men<sup>30</sup>. These risks are compounded in humanitarian crises; for women of all ages on the move and living in the emergency shelters, there is an increased risk of violence<sup>31</sup>.

### **Coping mechanisms pushed to the limit**

The impact on older people's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing in Gaza is severe and compounded by the repeated nature of the conflict, loss of family members, multiple displacements, and endless search for safety. Disruption and breakdown of normal family and community support structures leave older people isolated, anxious and bereft which can have a significant impact on their mental wellbeing.

Prior to this escalation, the data collected by El-Wedad and HelpAge showed that 52 per cent of older people felt depressed all or most of the time, with a greater number (78 per cent) stating that they felt anxious. Older people develop resilience, coping skills and capacities over the course of repeated conflicts which enables them to play valuable roles as caregivers, community leaders and organisers; however, in Gaza, they are now being pushed to their limit. The older people who lived through 1948 or 1967, have experienced a lifetime of conflict and suffering.

### **Health conditions worsening**

As of 7 February, there are no fully functional hospitals in Gaza, while 36 per cent of hospitals and 17 per cent of primary health care centres are only partially functional<sup>32</sup>. With medication in short supply, and health services severely disrupted, managing chronic diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension, and dementia, is a huge challenge. According to Palestinian health officials, 350,000 people in Gaza have non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and there is almost no medication available. There are major concerns related to psychological illnesses, for which medication is unavailable, as well as lack of treatment for high blood pressure<sup>33</sup>. NCDs have a disproportionate impact on older people – in 2019, 85 per cent of all deaths from NCDs globally were among people aged 55 and over.

The presence of these conditions, coupled with ageing immune systems, means many older people are also at greater risk from infectious diseases<sup>34</sup>. These risks are increased in a context of deteriorating hygiene conditions and infectious diseases may not be identified as quickly as necessary; HIV, tuberculosis, diarrhoea, and pneumonia, for example, present differently in older people and mortality rates are higher than among younger adults<sup>35</sup>. Winter conditions also present further challenges for older people, who face greater health risks associated with the onset of colder weather<sup>36</sup>.

### **Famine risk escalating**

According to UN Special Rapporteurs', "Gazans now make up 80 per cent of all people facing famine or catastrophic hunger worldwide"<sup>37</sup>. The entire population in the Gaza Strip being classified in IPC Phase 3 or above (Crisis or worse) is the highest share of people facing high levels of acute food insecurity that the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification initiative has ever classified for any given area or country<sup>38</sup>.

Malnutrition or undernutrition amongst older people is a recognised and challenging health concern that not only increases the risk of mortality and morbidity, but also leads to physical decline and poorer health outcomes. In 2021, the data collected by El-Wedad

and HelpAge indicated that 45 per cent of older people were going to bed hungry at least one night a week. The actual situation of older people following the escalation in the conflict in October 2023 is not known, but from experience of other conflicts, accessing food distribution points will be challenging for older people, with older women in particular facing security and protection related obstacles<sup>39</sup>. In addition, it is not uncommon in crisis situations to see older people forgoing food to ensure their children and grandchildren eat<sup>40</sup> and this will be even more likely in Gaza where the delivery of humanitarian assistance is already disrupted.

### **Working with Palestinian organisations**

Local organisations are the first responders in this crisis, delivering assistance and saving lives, while international organisations have been unable to access the Gaza strip. Going forward, international assistance efforts must recognise the strength of civil society in Palestine and work with local organisations to support their capacity to respond. For the sustainability of the humanitarian response, it is crucial to promote local crisis response leadership.

HelpAge is committed to Partner Led Programming (PLP) as a strategic approach to bring more impact to older people's lives by working with, through, and for the members of the HelpAge global network and other partners. Our local partners lead the design, implementation and learning of strategies and interventions in their own countries and communities. HelpAge co-designs our support, which involves accompaniment and skills sharing, advocating with, and amplifying the voices of partners and older people, and shifting more power and control of resources to our partners.

## **Recommendations**

HelpAge repeats global calls for an immediate and full ceasefire, without which it is virtually impossible for the UN or NGOs to deliver the life-saving goods and services so urgently needed. Safe, full, and unimpeded humanitarian access is critical to ensure that all affected people, including older people and people with disabilities, can be reached and can access urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance. All parties to the conflict must respect International Humanitarian Law, ensuring the safety of humanitarian workers, and the protection of civilians. This includes ending the use of starvation as a weapon of war against the civilians of Gaza.

The decision by some States to pause funding to UNRWA should immediately be reversed to ensure UNRWA's vital response in Gaza and the region can continue. The investigation by UNRWA into the alleged involvement of UN staff members in the October 7th attacks on Israel is necessary, but the suspension of funding will have a disastrous effect on Palestinian civilians who have already been deprived of essential food, fuel, medical assistance, water, shelter, and protection for months.

HelpAge also calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages. Given the possibility that some older hostages will have pre-existing health conditions that require immediate treatment, as well as potential injuries as a result of the events on 7 October, it is critical that they are immediately released. It is also vital that, while they continue to be held hostage, access is granted to them for the delivery of necessary medical treatment until such time as their release is secured.

If and when a ceasefire is granted, the following immediate steps should be taken to ensure the protection and inclusion of older people:

- Recognise the valuable role older people play as caregivers, community leaders and organisers, as well as their active role in conflict resolution, mediation, and peacebuilding efforts.

- Support the engagement, participation, empowerment, agency, and autonomy of older people and incorporate their perspectives in plans, programmes, and monitoring.
- Older people's rights should be respected, protected, and fulfilled and their specific needs met in the provision of essential support such as health and social care support and the provision of essential items. They must also receive information on what support is available, awareness-raising sessions on safety, psychosocial support and psychological first aid, and referrals to multi-sectoral emergency services.
- Sensory and cognitive impairments and lack of support can prevent older people from accessing or understanding information. All responding actors should ensure information is communicated via multiple mediums and a variety of accessible formats.
- Older people should be meaningfully included in the creation of any relocation plans for movement to safer areas in Gaza. When planning relocations, outreach support for those in hard-to-reach locations and for the most at risk isolated older people and their caregiver/families should be considered. Those who face additional risks, such as older people with disabilities and older women, should be prioritised. If required to relocate, it is critical that older people with disabilities have access to assistive products and assistance to relocate.
- Older people should be prioritised and dignified reception provided at temporary or emergency shelters and relief points.
- When developing plans for the construction of temporary accommodation, the requirements of older people and people with disabilities to live in a safe and dignified manner must be considered.
- In recognition of the severity of the crisis and the escalating and widespread needs, it is critical that significant funding is made available, and that any funding recognises older people as a priority target group due to the high risks they face. Organisations that have expertise in the delivery of humanitarian support to older people should be directly funded.

---

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> OCHA, Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #98

<sup>2</sup> HelpAge International, #CeasefireNow in the Gaza Strip and Israel, 19 October 2023

<sup>3</sup> OCHA, The war in Gaza must end - Statement by Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, 5 January 2024

<sup>4</sup> Integrated Food Security Phase Classification: Gaza Strip, November 2023-February 2024

<sup>5</sup> The Guardian, Aid officials believe there are 'pockets of famine' in Gaza, 16 January 2024

<sup>6</sup> UNRWA Situation Report #64 on the situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem

<sup>7</sup> International Court of Justice, Application on the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v Israel). Request for the indication of provisional measures, 26 January 2024

<sup>8</sup> United Nations, Statement by the Secretary-General - on UNRWA, 28 January 2024

<sup>9</sup> Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) Presents the Conditions of the Palestinian Population on the Occasion of the World Population Day, 11/07/2023

<sup>10</sup> OCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: occupied Palestinian territory, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> MedGlobal, Caring for Older Populations in Gaza

<sup>12</sup> Palestine News & Info Agency, Elderly in Palestine account for six percent of population, says Bureau of Statistics, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> El Weddad, HelpAge International, Age International, Gaza: Needs Assessment of older people, 2021

<sup>14</sup> UNFPA and HelpAge International, The rights and wellbeing of older persons in the State of Palestine, 2021

<sup>15</sup> HelpAge International, Age International, If not now, when? Keeping promises to older people affected by humanitarian crises, 2020.

- 
- <sup>16</sup> Al Jazeera, Know their names, 1 November 2023
- <sup>17</sup> Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, Shocking testimonies reveal the execution of dozens of elderly people by Israeli army in the Gaza Strip, 22 December 2023
- <sup>18</sup> Amnesty International, "I used to have a home": older people's experience of war, displacement, and access to housing in Ukraine, 2022
- <sup>19</sup> American Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council & American Academy of Nursing, Closing the Gaps: Advancing Disaster Preparedness, Response and Recovery for Older Adults, 2020
- <sup>20</sup> HelpAge International, I've lost the life I knew: Older people's experiences of the Ukraine war and their inclusion in the humanitarian response, 2023
- <sup>21</sup> UN Women, Gender Alert: The Gendered Impact of the Crisis in Gaza, January 2024
- <sup>22</sup> Juzoor, Humanitarian response and impact report, 6 February 2024
- <sup>23</sup> HelpAge International, Older people face desolation in overcrowded shelters in northern Gaza as war deepens, 1 November 2023
- <sup>24</sup> United Nations, Secretary-General's remarks to the Non-Aligned Movement, 20 January 2024
- <sup>25</sup> Sky News, Gaza evacuation: Why getting people out in less than 24 hours is 'impossible', 15 October 2023
- <sup>26</sup> PBS News, 'This year is a nightmare': Gaza's children face starvation amid dire conditions, 7 January 2024
- <sup>27</sup> Care International, Gaza Strip Rapid Gender Analysis, October 2023
- <sup>28</sup> OHCHR, Statement by UN Special Procedures Experts: Occupied Palestinian territory and Israel: Women and girls face exacerbated violence, inequalities and discrimination and see their future destroyed in front of their eyes, 14 December 2023
- <sup>29</sup> Unpublished HelpAge research into the impact of incontinence on older people in humanitarian emergencies.
- <sup>30</sup> OCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: occupied Palestinian territory, 2023.
- <sup>31</sup> GBV Sub-Cluster, Gaza Crisis: Gender Based Violence Concerns and Priorities Information & Advocacy Note, 20 October 2023
- <sup>32</sup> OCHA, Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #113
- <sup>33</sup> WHO, WHO and partners bring fuel to Al-Shifa, as remaining hospitals in Gaza face growing threats, 24 January 2024
- <sup>34</sup> HelpAge International, Achieving Universal Health Coverage fit for an ageing world, 2022
- <sup>35</sup> Thomas T. Yoshikawa, Epidemiology and Unique Aspects of Aging and Infectious Diseases, Clinical Infectious Diseases, Volume 30, Issue 6, June 2000, Pages 931-933
- <sup>36</sup> Age UK, Information and advice: Keeping warm and well in winter
- <sup>37</sup> UN OHCHR, Press release: Over one hundred days into the war, Israel destroying Gaza's food system and weaponizing food, say UN human rights experts, 16 January 2024
- <sup>38</sup> Integrated Food Security Phase Classification: Gaza Strip, November 2023-February 2024
- <sup>39</sup> UN Women, Gender Alert: The Gendered Impact of the Crisis in Gaza, January 2024
- <sup>40</sup> Hachem S et al (2022), "Older people tend to be invisible": a qualitative study exploring the needs and inclusion of older Syrian refugees in the context of compounding crises in host country, Lebanon. Conflict and Health, 16(1), p.61.

---

**HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy, and secure lives.**

Published by HelpAge International

**[www.helpage.org](http://www.helpage.org)**

Registered charity no. 288180

 @HelpAge  HelpAge International

Copyright © HelpAge International 2024

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>