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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[27 May 2021]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Gaza's Children Deprived of Their Right to Education

Israeli Airstrikes Terminated the Academic Year for Gaza's Students:

As a result of Israeli airstrikes bombarding the besieged Gaza strip from May 10th - 21st all schools and educational facilities in Gaza had to end their academic year prematurely, with no final exams for most students. This premature closure is due to Israeli airstrikes destroying and damaging over 54 Palestinian schools, including Kindergartens¹. On 11 and 12 May, two UNRWA schools were hit within the context of airstrikes by Israel on Gaza, causing extensive damage to the compound's western perimeter and to at least 29 classrooms. Pursuant to international law, including the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, UNRWA premises, property and assets are inviolable. All UNRWA facilities are clearly marked with a UN flag. Israel's airstrikes on UNRWA sites are a flagrant violation of international law². According to the UN, 600,000 Palestinian students face 'significant learning loss, in addition to the psychosocial consequences.'

International humanitarian law prohibits indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks and requires all parties to an armed conflict to distinguish between military targets, civilians, and civilian objects. While Israel relies on the principle of self-defense to justify military offensives on Gaza, Israeli forces are bound to customary international law rules of proportionality and necessity. As the occupying power in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including the Gaza Strip, Israel is required to protect the Palestinian civilian population from violence³.

Israel's most recent military bombardment killed 68 Palestinian children in Gaza, 19 of whom attended UNRWA schools⁴.

UN Schools Closed for Education - Open for Refuge:

Israeli airstrikes destroyed over 1,800+ residential units - now unfit for housing and partially destroyed another 14,300 housing units, leaving over 75,000 Palestinians displaced, and forced to seek shelter in UN schools in Gaza⁵. Instead of UN schools being used to provide Gaza's children their right to education, they are being used to shelter tens of thousands of Palestinians who have lost their homes, in Israel's most recent military aggression. Over 75,000 Palestinians are now seeking shelter in overcrowded UN schools, where social-distancing and wearing masks is impossible, which could possibly further escalate the current COVID-19 crisis in Gaza. Gaza, which is home to over two million people, is also one of the most densely populated territories on earth, making social distancing hard even in peacetime⁶.

Mental Health Severely Affecting Gaza's Students & Their Education:

¹ ROYA News - Gaza's Education Ministry ends current academic year for students in grade 1-11 - MAY 2021 <https://en.royanews.tv/news/28190/2021-05-23>.

² UN OCHA - UNRWA Installations in Gaza hit during hostilities - MAY 2021 <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/unrwa-installations-gaza-hit-during-hostilities>.

³ DCI Palestine - 67 Palestinian children killed in Gaza as missing toddler's body is located in rubble - MAY 2021 https://www.dci-palestine.org/67_palestinian_children_gaza_missing_palestinian_toddler_body_pulled_from_the_rubble.

⁴ Al Jazeera - Palestinian groups slam UNRWA director's comments on Gaza attacks - MAY 2021 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/25/un-gaza-official-comments-slammed-by-palestinians-as-dangerous>.

⁵ Al Jazeera - Challenges impede war-ravaged Gaza reconstruction efforts - MAY 2021 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/25/in-ravaged-gaza-reconstruction-impeded-by-draining-challenges>.

⁶ The Independent - After 11 days of war, Gaza's next crisis could be the coronavirus - MAY 2021 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/gaza-israel-coronavirus-crisis-doctors-b1852840.html>.

Gaza's overwhelmingly young population - nearly half are aged under 14 - has been exposed to a crippling blockade, sporadic attacks, and four all-out military campaigns since 2008. Previous research by Save the Children has shown the traumatising effects of Israeli bombing on children in the Gaza Strip. A majority of children had nightmares and were wetting the bed a year after the 2014 assault on the enclave, and as many as 89% of parents said their children were constantly afraid. Three years later, a quarter of children in Gaza - 290,000 - were found to need continuous psychosocial support. A majority of caretakers reported at that time that children were terrified of aircraft and bombing sounds and feared the threat of war and death. A majority of children reported feeling scared to be alone.

This constant state of fear of Israeli airstrikes that encapsulates the majority of Gaza's children, not only affects their education and their ability to thrive in school, college and university, it will also leave a permanent mental scar, for their entire lives, if adequate and comprehensive mental health services are not provided to them. As well as an immediate end to Israel's illegal blockade of Gaza is not reached. A UN report found high levels of stress, sleep deprivation, depression, grief and speech problems among Gaza's children. Before this wave of violence, the United Nations Children's Fund reported that 1 in 3 children in Gaza required mental health and psychosocial support⁷.

Conclusion:

PRC is deeply concerned about the damage that has been done to over 54 Palestinian schools, and the effects of the premature closure of schools and educational facilities in Gaza is going to have on Palestinian students. PRC calls on the members of the Human Rights Council to ensure Palestinian students in Gaza are not deprived of their innate human right to education. PRC highlights Article 26 of the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states: 'Everyone has the right to education'. Since its adoption, the right to education has been reaffirmed in numerous human rights treaties and declarations adopted by the United Nations, and PRC urges for this right to be upheld for Gaza's students. PRC calls for the immediate funds to be allocated to rebuild and repair the schools destroyed and damaged by Israeli airstrikes, adequate mental health provisions made available to Gaza's students, as well action to be taken in response to Israel's flagrant international law violations committed by striking UNRWA sites, as well as Palestinian schools and educational facilities.

⁷ Al Araby - Years of suffering ahead for Palestinian children in Gaza says Save the Children - MAY 2021 <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/gaza-bombardment-will-cause-years-long-suffering-children-ngo>.