



# Caring

through crisis

ISLAMIC RELIEF'S RESPONSE TO A YEAR OF UNPRECEDENTED  
SUFFERING FOR GAZA'S ORPHANED CHILDREN

# Introduction



The number of orphaned children in Gaza has surged in a year of unprecedented bombardment and trauma since early October 2023. Islamic Relief has responded by expanding our Orphan Sponsorship Programme by 73 per cent, supporting nearly 7,000 additional orphaned children and young people in the face of extraordinary human suffering and immense pressure on Gaza's overwhelmed social services and orphan care institutions.

The impact of Israel's attacks and siege on so many thousands of families has been heart wrenching, and children are among those who have suffered most. Those who have become orphans, abruptly severed from the warmth and protection of one or both of their parents, face an array of profound challenges that extend far beyond the immediate trauma of loss.

The loss of a parent is not only devastating emotionally and psychologically, but also often results in severe socioeconomic hardships. Gaza's orphaned children and young people are being left in precarious situations, struggling with the void left by their parents' deaths while grappling with poverty, lack of education, and inadequate healthcare – all challenges that have intensified in the last year.

The loss of a parent who is the family's main breadwinner is particularly devastating in a situation of crisis because it often occurs within the context of broader societal instability and displacement. The destruction of homes, schools and healthcare facilities has exacerbated the plight of orphaned children and young people.

Many are now living in shelters or with distant relatives, often in overcrowded and unsafe conditions. They need proper housing, food and medical care. Many are suffering from severe psychological trauma, having lost one or even both of their parents and, in many cases, having witnessed extreme violence.

United Nations agencies and various other humanitarian organisations estimate that nearly 80 per cent of children in Gaza need some form of humanitarian assistance, and the number of orphaned children is expected to continue rising as the crisis continues.

Since the start of the escalation, it is estimated that over 16,000 children have been killed, with many more injured. Islamic Relief is heartbroken that 118 children and young people once cared for through our Orphan Sponsorship Programme have been killed so far. The number of children who have lost one or both parents because of the violence is also rising sharply.

According to UNICEF, the United Nations children's fund, more than one million children in Gaza are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. More than 1.9 million people – a significant proportion of them children – have been displaced since the start of the attacks. Many of these displaced children are already orphaned or are at risk of being orphaned.

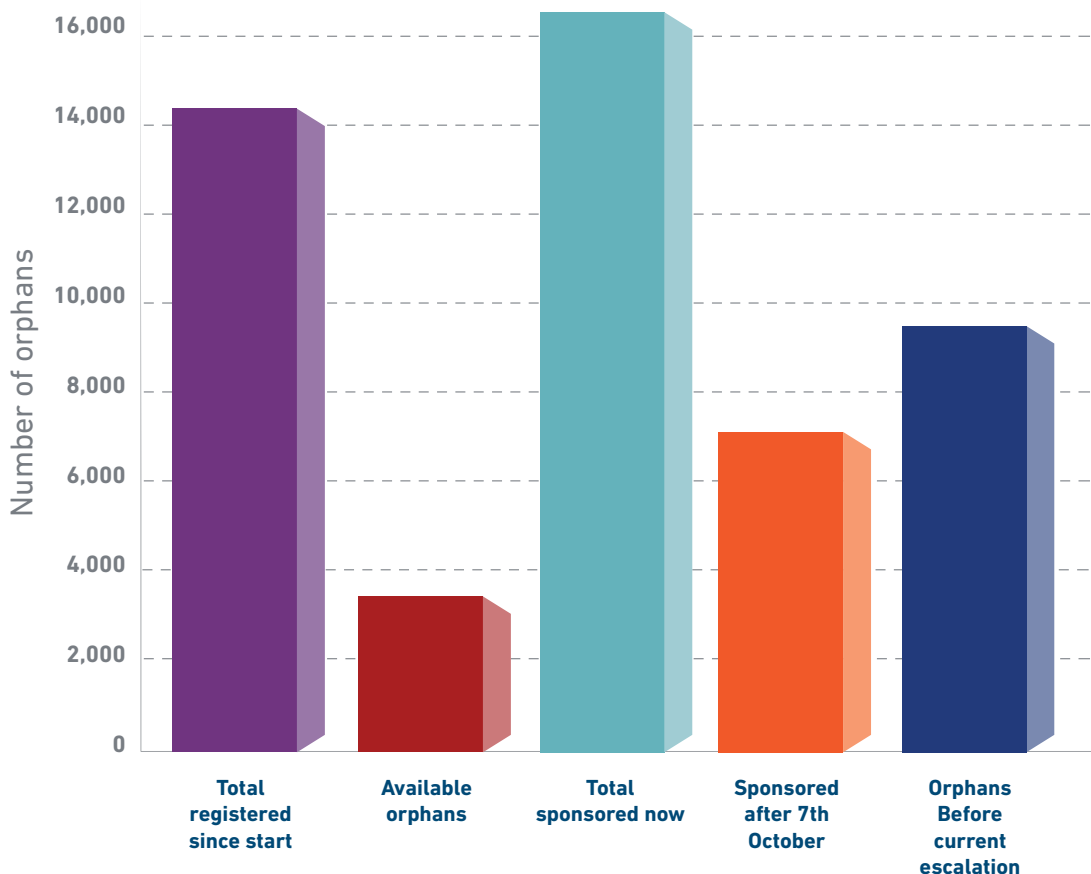
Reports indicate that up to 90 per cent of Gaza's children, including orphans, are suffering from some form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or severe emotional distress as a result of witnessing violence, displacement, and the loss of loved ones. The committed support our orphaned children and young people receive from sponsors around the world will be needed for many years to come.

# Expanding Islamic Relief's orphan support

In the very challenging conditions in which they are working, Islamic Relief's team and partners in Gaza have worked tirelessly to support the children and young people already enrolled on our programme - while also enrolling more. This has involved opening new orphan registration points across Gaza, registering new orphaned children and young people in need of support, and matching them with sponsors around the world.

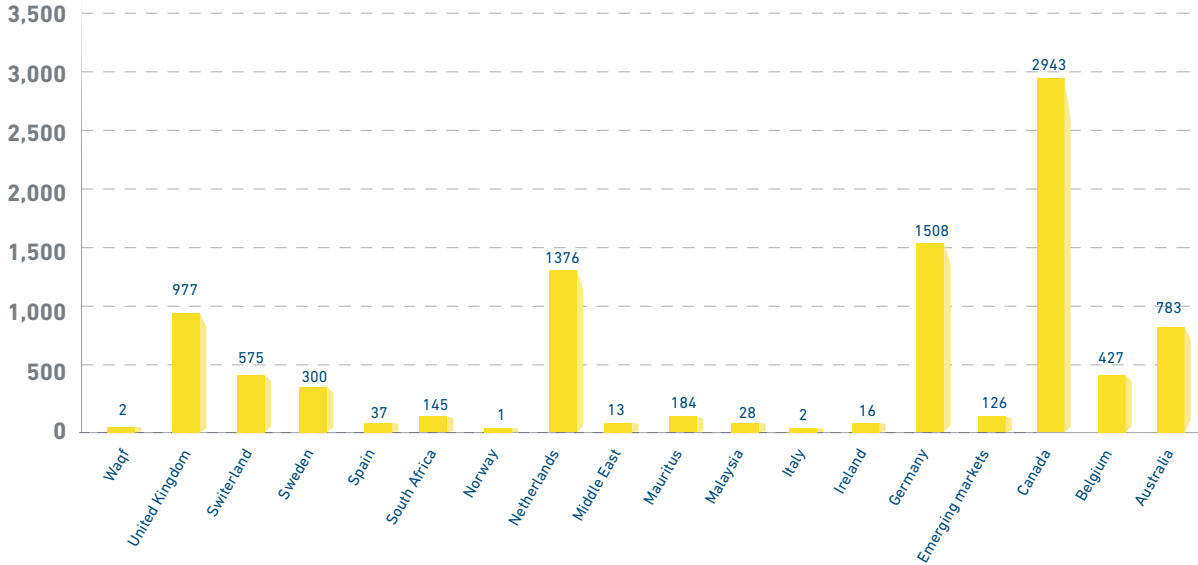
In the past year the total number of orphaned children we support in Gaza has risen by 6,968 to 16,410 - an increase of 73 per cent (see table). This has been made possible by the hard work of our staff on the ground and the extraordinary generosity of our sponsors internationally. There is still more work to be done - we have identified a further 2,668 children in need of sponsorship who do not yet have a sponsor, and there are likely to be many more.

ORPHANED CHILDREN SPONSORED BY ISLAMIC RELIEF BEFORE AND AFTER THE ESCALATION	
Number sponsored before the escalation	8,700
Number newly enrolled and sponsored since the escalation began	7,710
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,410</b>
Additional orphaned children identified by our team in Gaza as needing support and sponsorship	2,668

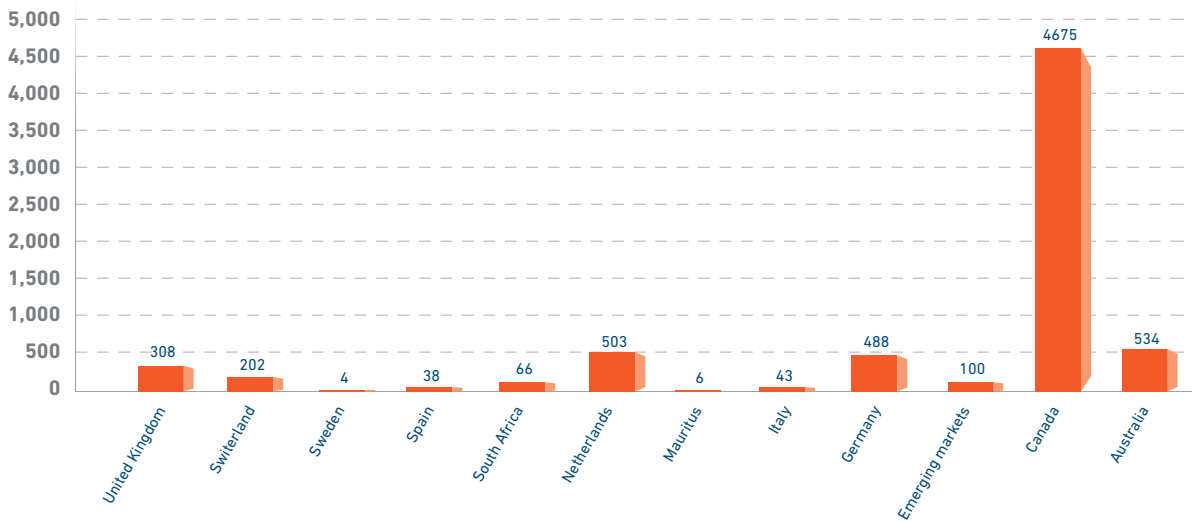


The work of registering new orphaned children and young people and matching them with sponsors has been helped by swift uploading of the child's details to our global AlYateem system, coupled with the efforts of Islamic Relief offices to find sponsors as quickly as possible.

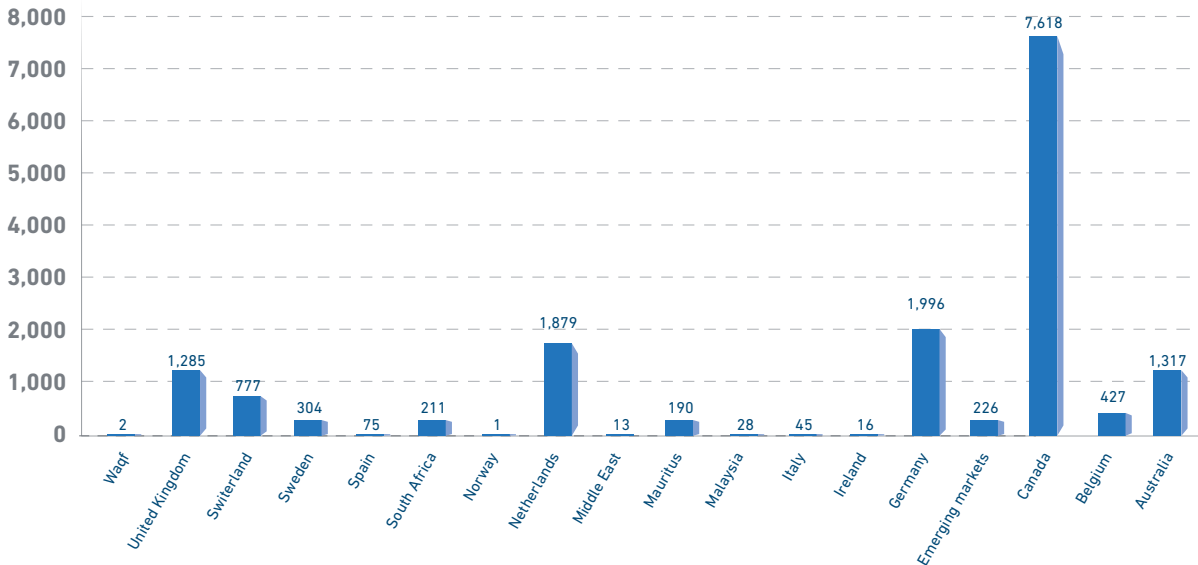
### ORPHANS ENROLLED BEFORE CURRENT ESCALATION



### ORPHANS ENROLLED SINCE CURRENT ESCALATION BEGAN



### TOTAL ORPHANS NOW ENROLLED IN GAZA



# Meeting basic needs

In the harsh circumstances faced by orphaned children and young people in Gaza, we are trying to meet their basic needs to ensure they can survive the current crisis, protecting their wellbeing and supporting their recovery from trauma. The needs we are working hard to meet include:

## 1. Food and nutrition:

This is a top priority, as many orphaned children and young people cannot be sure where their next meal is coming from and need regular, nutritionally balanced meals.

## 2. Shelter and safety:

New permanent housing will be vital if the situation allows, as many of our orphaned children and young people are displaced and living in overcrowded shelters, temporary homes, or even tents.

## 3. Healthcare:

Access to medical care, including treatment for potentially deadly and debilitating diseases, is essential, along with the provision of mental health support.

## 4. Clothing and personal hygiene:

Orphaned children and young people need appropriate clothing for varying weather conditions and they need access to personal hygiene items to maintain basic hygiene, prevent illness, and protect dignity.

## 5. Counselling and emotional care:

Many orphaned children and young people are traumatised and need a combination of counselling, trauma therapy, and safe spaces where they can gather, interact and begin to heal emotionally.

## 6. Places to learn:

Our orphaned children need school supplies, safe learning environments, and programmes of counselling and trauma therapy that are built into their schooling to help them cope with emotionally while maintaining their studies.

## 7. Social support:

Orphaned children and young people need strong social support networks to give them a sense of belonging and stability and provide emotional support.

## 8. Protection:

Orphaned children and young people are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. They need protective services, legal support, and close observation and monitoring to ensure they are not being exploited or abused in any way.

Meeting these basic needs is essential for ensuring the survival and recovery of orphaned children and young people in Gaza, as they face overwhelming challenges in the context of crisis and displacement.

Islamic Relief is prominent among a number of humanitarian organisations that have prioritised providing food and other humanitarian assistance to orphaned children and young people and displaced families in addition to orphan sponsorship. In partnership with local organisations in the North, Middle and South areas of Gaza, we have provided food

vouchers that people can use to buy groceries, food parcels to enable families to prepare their own meals, and direct food distributions, including hot meals and basic staples.

Our local partners have worked with us and other humanitarian organisations to distribute vital non-food items such as blankets, clothing and hygiene kits. Our efforts aim to ensure that displaced orphaned children and young people have access to the essentials they need to survive, and that they can maintain some sense of normality.

Our sponsored children and young people have also benefited from emergency shelter materials, such as tarpaulins and tents, that we have provided to many families.

Islamic Relief and UNICEF are among several organisations working to ensure orphaned children have

access to education. Our work includes providing school materials and supporting educational initiatives for children in camps.

The table below shows the projects in which the sponsored children have been integrated since the beginning of the current crisis:

#	ASSISTANCE FOR ORPHANED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH ISLAMIC RELIEF AND OUR LOCAL PARTNERS	SECTOR	RIGHTSHOLDERS
1	Cash	Cash assistance	700
2	Newborn baby kits (supported by Islamic Relief Germany)	Non-food aid	190
3	Vegetable baskets	Food assistance	3,000
4	Qurbani meat (3 kilos per family)	Food assistance	4,600
5	Winter blankets	Non-food aid	1,000
6	Plastic sheeting for tents	Shelter	200
7	Clothes	Non-food aid	1,000
8	Hygiene kits	Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)	1,500
9	Food parcels	Food assistance	4,000
10	Mattresses and shelter kits	Shelter	2,000



The food and other materials we have distributed in collaboration with our local partners are critical for meeting the immediate and longer-term needs of our sponsored children and young people in Gaza, providing them with the basic necessities and support they need to survive and to recover from the trauma they are enduring.

We are conscious, however, that the sheer scale of the current crisis often exceeds the capacity of humanitarian programmes to meet everyone's needs. In a context of intense ongoing violence and restrictions imposed on humanitarian aid, we have not been able to meet the entire needs of all our sponsored children and young people and their families.

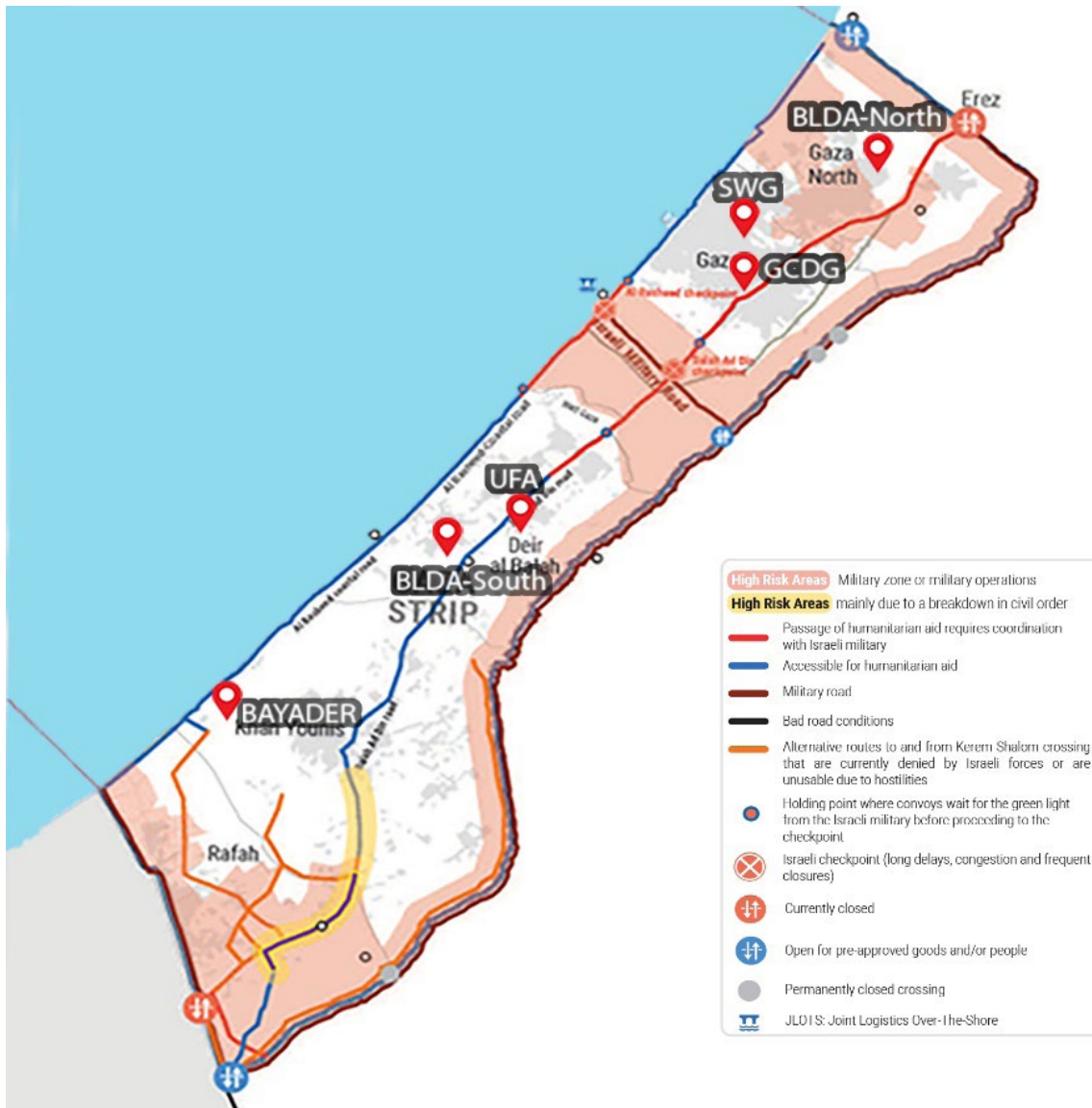
# New registration points for additional orphan support

Islamic Relief's orphans team in Gaza and our local partner organisations provided support to orphaned children and young people and displaced families as soon as they could after the escalation began, delivering aid in Rafah, Khan Younis and the Middle Area.

Four new orphans' registration points were established in what were hoped to be relatively safe areas, and it was in these zones that we started to register new children and young people and deliver critical assistance to them and their displaced families.

The four new registration points were reduced to two for a while – at Dair Al Balah and Al Zawayda in the Middle Area – as a result of crisis and further displacement in Rafah and Khan Younis. The registration point in Khan Younis has recently reopened and three registration points have been established in the north, bringing the total up to six.

## Locations of orphan registration points:



# Grappling with significant and complex challenges

All Islamic Relief staff in Gaza, including our orphans team, continue to face huge and complex challenges that are limiting the reach and effectiveness of aid delivery. These challenges include:

## 1. Security risks and violence:

The repeated targeting of civilian areas in military operations and the enormous destruction of infrastructure – including hospitals, schools repurposed as shelters for displaced people, and aid warehouses – has significantly disrupted aid efforts. More than 300 humanitarian workers have been killed.

## 2. Supply shortages:

The long-term Israeli blockade of Gaza was tightened even further at the onset of the escalation, which has severely restricted the amount of aid that can enter. The limited aid convoys since then have been unable to keep up with the huge needs. There are critical shortages of essential supplies such as food, water, fuel, and medical equipment.

## 3. Staff trauma:

The crisis has traumatised a lot of aid workers, many of whom have lost loved ones or have been displaced from their homes. The emotional and psychological toll of working in such a high-stress, traumatic environment is immense, affecting people's ability to perform their duties effectively.

## 4. Communication and coordination:

Communications networks have been severely damaged, making coordination between our staff and the sponsored families difficult. This has delayed the services and support we have been able to provide.

## 5. Destruction of infrastructure:

Extensive damage to roads, hospitals, water systems and electricity grids has made it extremely difficult for our team to reach orphaned children and young people and their families.

## 6. Lack of safe zones:

Our humanitarian workers and our local partner organisations lack safe areas from which to operate. Shelters and so-called 'safe zones' have been hit during airstrikes, making it difficult for our staff to find secure locations to set up operations and distribute aid.

## 7. Overwhelmed aid systems:

In the current crisis, unprecedented numbers of people have been killed (over 42,000), injured (over 97,000) and displaced (more than 1.9 million). The sheer scale of the crisis has overwhelmed hospitals, arrangements for displaced people, and indeed the entire aid sector. Protection services for children and orphans are struggling to accommodate the growing number of orphaned children.

## 8. Restricted access and ongoing blockades:

The ongoing blockade severely limits the delivery of humanitarian aid, including food, medicine and essential supplies – especially into northern Gaza. Border crossings such as Rafah and Erez are frequently closed or highly restricted, making it difficult for aid convoys to enter Gaza. The damage, disruption and uncertainty inflicted by intense bombardment have resulted in two orphan registration points being closed, although one of these has now reopened.



# Restricted access to cash – an enormous added burden



The scarcity of cash in the Gaza Strip is one of the biggest challenges facing everyone in the occupied territory, from displaced families to aid workers. Ongoing restrictions mean the availability of cash is severely limited, creating difficulties for individuals and families trying to access basic necessities.

Our sponsored children and young people have been among those suffering, experiencing difficulty in redeeming cash assistance provided through codes issued by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). Many of our guardians have had to pay up to 30 per cent of their cash assistance to local currency exchange offices in order to redeem the funds. This significantly reduces the amount of aid that people can use to support their families, further exacerbating the severe economic hardship that people are suffering.

The cash liquidity crisis in Gaza has reached a critical point, driven by a combination of political, economic, and logistical factors. The ongoing blockade, restrictions on movement, and limited access to banking systems have disrupted the flow of cash into Gaza.

This issue requires immediate attention from international organisations, aid donors, and local authorities to find solutions that ensure cash assistance retains its value and can be accessed without significant barriers or losses.

Since the escalation began in October 2023, our orphans team on the ground in Gaza have succeeded in using WFP codes to transfer all the 2023 stipends provided by our sponsors around the world, but the value of those stipends has been eroded. Cash liquidity and the ability to redeem cash assistance have recently improved, but still the redemption value of cash assistance to beneficiaries is only 85 per cent, according to WFP reports.

We expect sponsorship funds for the second and third quarters of 2024 to be disbursed by the end of the year.



## Resilience in adversity - our orphan support in action

The profound suffering of individual children and families can easily be lost in the mass of casualty and displacement statistics in this ferocious and dehumanising crisis. Our teams in Gaza have witnessed the heartbreaking impact of the death and destruction caused but also the extraordinary resilience of those affected – captured in the following case studies.

### Rose

On 12 December 2023, six-year-old Rose and her family were struck by a profound tragedy. Rose and her older siblings were in school in Khan Younis when their father was killed, taking away the family's sole breadwinner and a pillar of strength in their home.

Rose's father had worked tirelessly washing cars and as a porter to make ends meet. For two months preceding his death and in the eight months that followed, the family endured unimaginable hardship, displaced multiple times as the attacks spread, moving from one shelter to another.

Their existence was one of survival, frequently hungry and barely scraping by. They relied on grinding wheat manually and eating canned food provided by the children's schools, as they had no means to buy fresh vegetables. The soaring cost of living, including astronomical prices for essential goods, made it impossible for them to have a nutritious, balanced diet.



Rana, Rose's mother, is now responsible for caring for her six children on her own. All six are young – Mohamed, the eldest, was only in seventh grade when his father was killed.

Support from various charities gave Rana the strength to keep on fighting for survival and for her children's future. The only place they have to call home is a tent, a meagre structure provided by a relative. With a makeshift plastic sheet for a roof and fraying fabric for walls, it barely shields them from the elements and

at first, they lacked even the essentials for survival: no proper bedding, no kitchen utensils, and only a few threadbare blankets. Despite the almost unbearable conditions, Rana is fiercely resilient. She often borrows cooking utensils from her sister or other relatives to prepare what little food they have. Most of the time, the family relies on the kindness of strangers and charity kitchens to feed themselves.



Rana draws strength from her unwavering faith and expresses profound gratitude for the help her family have received.

"One should never lose hope or despair in God's mercy," she says. "I am deeply grateful to the Bayader Association and Islamic Relief for the voucher worth 150 Israeli shekels [around £30] that they provided. It allowed me to buy some basic necessities for my children, especially since we hadn't eaten any nourishing food like milk, eggs, or cheese for months.

"They also provided us with a basket of fresh vegetables, which was such a rare blessing. The joy on my children's faces was indescribable; it felt as if we had regained something precious in life."

"Praise be to God in all situations," Rana says, her voice filled with a kind of resignation but also real strength. "We feel like we are living in a nightmare, cooking over an open fire, and the children walking long distances just to fetch water for washing and cleaning. Sometimes, we receive free desalinated water from trucks, and other times we have to purchase it.

"In the end, I just pray that God gives me the strength to raise my children. They are my support, my life, and I will do whatever it takes to see smiles on their faces. They are the light of my heart."

# Lamis



Before the escalation, Lamis was a bright and active nine-year-old in good health. After the trauma of repeated bombardment and being displaced six times in a year, she has become aggressive, stubborn, less active, and prone to sleeping a lot.

Lamis's mother, 40-year-old Shereen, tries to involve her in activities like tidying up their living space and washing dishes to help her become active again and lift the clouds of depression she is experiencing. It is far from easy. Lamis began wetting herself around two weeks after the crisis started, requiring continuous use of diapers that are expensive and often unavailable.

Lamis lives with Shereen and her five siblings – four girls and a boy. The youngest is Maryam, seven, and the eldest Marah, 21. Twelve-year-old Mohammed is responsible for fetching scarce drinking water for the family each day as well as more readily available salt water for washing and bathing. Farah, 15, has short toes and needs surgery abroad to correct this – but surgery is something she can only dream of. Shereen struggles with multiple health challenges – high blood pressure, diabetes, and disc problems in her back.

"I live in constant fear for Lamis," says Shereen. "She is still a child but has become aggressive because of the trauma she experienced during the crisis and her fear of the sounds of rockets and shells.

"We have lived through unforgettable days since the crisis began. In the first week, a house next to ours was bombed, and our home was destroyed. I thank God that we had already evacuated and were living in a relative's storage room at the time, but we could only stay there for a week as the entire area was bombed.

"Our next move was to Al-Fakhoura School for two weeks. The building next to the school was bombed while we were sleeping,

and shrapnel fell on us, injuring my left leg. Thankfully, I have recovered, and all my children survived.

"We fled with the civil defence to Faisal School in Jabalia for two months. We faced hunger, fear, and thirst, surviving on biscuits and bread without much water to drink. That school was also bombed, and my daughter Reem was burned by shrapnel on her right hand. She has since recovered and continues to receive follow-up care from Doctors Without Borders."

Next came another displacement to a school in Deir Al-Balah, where the family lived for two months, before fleeing to Rafah further south when the school was shelled by a tank. After a month in Rafah, they returned to Deir Al-Balah. "We were exhausted and sick from constant moving, with no money to provide for our basic needs in food and drink."

It was in Deir Al-Balah that Shereen and her family received sponsorship support from Islamic Relief. "We couldn't buy anything because prices were extremely high and supplies were insufficient," Shereen remembers. "The first time in Deir Al Balah we stayed in the school for two months, struggling with a lack of water, flour, and vegetables, surviving on canned food that made us sick. When we received the sponsorship message, I rushed to buy vegetables, flour, and cleaning supplies – things we had sorely missed – despite their high prices. Cleaning supplies were out of stock for a long time, and diseases spread, especially since we lived in an overcrowded school with other displaced people."

Lamis dreams of the crisis ending so she can go back to school and see her friends again. "I miss my home, my room, and my toys," she says. "I dream of not hearing the sounds of rockets and shells and sleeping peacefully.

"I was very pleased when my mother bought flour, vegetables, and legumes and started cooking for us. I was tired of eating canned food, and my stomach always hurt, but I had to eat it out of hunger. I prayed a lot for my dear sponsor for caring for me and not forgetting me during the crisis."



# Facing up to a challenging future



Our orphans team and our local partner organisations are struggling to provide even the most basic of necessities in Gaza because of the devastating impact of a year of bombardment, fighting and displacement. The supply chains people rely on for food and other essentials are severely disrupted, and the currency conversion fees we have highlighted in this report are devaluing the support we provide.

Not only do families in Gaza have less cash at their disposal, but what money they do have buys less than it did a year ago. The prices of basic goods such as food, medicine and fuel have skyrocketed because of supply shortages and economic isolation.

When these challenges are considered alongside the ongoing violence, destruction of infrastructure and

restrictions on aid movement that have become part of life in Gaza, the survival of hundreds of thousands of people remains on a knife edge.

The orphaned children we support are at the forefront of the suffering. We are profoundly thankful to Islamic Relief family members and our sponsors around the world for enabling us to expand our support for Gaza's orphaned children and young people in this hour of unprecedented need. We hope and pray that with your continued generosity the lifeline we provide can be sustained in the long term: our Orphan Sponsorship Programme is needed more now than ever before, and will be vital if families are to recover from the current crisis to live in dignity and hope in the future.

Continue supporting our

*lifesaving work*



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