

More than half a million Gaza students return to school after a shattering summer

Gaza, 14 September 2014 – More than half a million students are returning to school in Gaza today, with memories still fresh of 50 days of intense violence that engulfed the territory during July and August, say 11 members of the education cluster¹. The violence – which ended with a ceasefire on August 26 - left more than 500 children killed, 3,300 injured and many thousands more distressed by their traumatic experiences.

Huge efforts have been made to ensure that students return to safe, clean, and well equipped schools with supportive teachers, and counsellors. This year, unlike previous years, the first week of schooling is being devoted to structured psychosocial support and recreational activities that ease the transition back to learning.

“Instilling hope and promoting courage in the worst situations is critical. Getting children back in school will bring a sense of normality back to children’s lives’, say Dave and Paulette Hassell, Co-Country Directors of Save the Children, which, with UNICEF co-leads the Education Cluster, coordinating humanitarian action in the sector.

The recent conflict left 258 schools and kindergartens damaged, including 26 schools that are beyond repair. And more than 63,000 people, of whom half are children below age 18, remain displaced at 29 UNRWA schools. This situation exacerbates the already burdened school system; more than 80 per cent of schools were running double shifts even prior to the recent conflict.

‘Investing in education is an investment for the future,’ says UNICEF-State of Palestine Special Representative, June Kunugi. ‘Without increased support and commitment to their education and protection, an entire generation in Gaza could be lost. It is our collective moral obligation to prevent this,’ she adds.

More than a quarter of a million other students attend public-run schools. Members of the education cluster, including the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, have provided educational supplies to all public schools, and will carry out recreational activities, including psychosocial support, as well as carrying basic repairs for lightly damaged schools.

UNICEF is providing 130,000 schools bags, including stationery kits, teaching aids for all government schools, and has carried out training of nearly 12,000 school counsellors, teachers and supervisors on improved counselling skills. In addition, UNICEF has undertaken the cleaning of 18 public schools that were used as shelters during the height of the conflict.

Initial estimates show that at least \$30 million is needed until the end of the year to address the devastating impact of the recent conflict on school infrastructure in Gaza – and ensure that all children in Gaza are able to go to and stay in school.

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¹ International Medical Corps, MA'AN Development Centre, Norwegian Refugee Council, Right to Play, Save the Children, Secours Islamique France, Theatre Day Productions, TOMOOH Association for Skills Development, UNESCO, UNICEF and World Vision International.