500 days after evacuation from Gaza, children “dream of peace and returning home”

Thursday 24 July, 2025

24th July 2025: Today marks 500 days since SOS Children’s Villages evacuated 68 children, along with 11 caregivers and their families, from the SOS Children's Village in Rafah due to the imminent threat of a ground attack. The evacuation was seen as a temporary measure to remove them from immediate danger. Since these children were evacuated, the SOS Children’s Village in Rafah was entirely destroyed by bombardment.

SOS Children’s villages, the world’s largest charity supporting children without or at risk of losing care, has since been calling for the guarantee that all Gazans leaving the strip must be given the right to return.

Ghada Hirzallah, National Director of SOS Children’s Villages Palestine, said, “*Despite the hardship, many children and youth we work with still speak of hopeful futures. They want to become doctors, chefs, teachers, engineers, artists in roles where they can help others. They dream of peace, of returning to their homes*, to Gaza, and of feeling safe enough to build a life.

“Some of the young people want to continue their education and dream of a day on which they can resume their studies and scholarships. What they need most is the stability and protection to make those dreams feel possible.”

However, the unstable security situation in the West Bank has also caused distress, particularly since January 2025. **Frequent Israeli military incursions have triggered past traumas, especially among children who associate military presence with earlier traumatic experiences in Gaza.**

SOS Children’s Villages worked through diplomatic channels with all relevant authorities to bring the children and adults to Bethlehem in the West Bank, where they arrived safely on 11 March 2024. The children were aged between two and 14 years, and were in the care of SOS Children's Villages as they had lost parental care before the war.

When the children first arrived in the West Bank, SOS Children’s Villages staff described how during their first breakfast after leaving Gaza, the children hesitated to eat what was on their plate because they were used to sharing limited amounts of food and didn’t understand that they were allowed to eat it all.

Since being evacuated from Gaza, children have adapted well to structured daily routines, including going to school, weekend outings, and creative and recreational activities such as sports, art therapy, music and singing lessons.

Speaking about the evacuated children and how they are faring now, Ghada Hirzallah, National Director of SOS Children’s Villages Palestine, said, “We see them now engaging joyfully in activities. Despite the fear and instability, their smiles and laughter during the sessions are profoundly moving. It confirms the importance of our presence and programs and reminded us that even in crisis, healing is possible with the right support.”

Another significant challenge for the evacuated children is overcoming the deep emotional strain of being separated from extended family members, after losing parental care and enduring life-threatening conditions in Gaza.

SOS Children’s Villages UK has been contributing to support the continued safety and wellbeing of the evacuated children.

Alison Wallace, CEO of SOS Children’s Villages UK, said, “*After being evacuated from Rafah, three teenage girls told our staff* in the West Bank that they were deeply thankful and hoped to pay it forward one day. No child or teenager should have to feel ‘grateful’ for being placed in relative safety.

“While these children are no longer in imminent danger, they remain in limbo; *safe for* now, but cut off from the place they called home.

“Meanwhile, ***500 days after our evacuation, children and families who live in Gaza continue to face mortal danger****. It is* ***unforgivable that children still in Gaza are being killed while queuing for food,***

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water, and medical aid, and vital humanitarian **assistance has been obstructed, politicised, and even targeted*.***

*"While we are continuing our efforts to make sure the evacuated children in the West Bank are fully supported to thrive, i****t is increasingly urgent that the international community comes together to advocate for the rights of displaced Gazans to make a safe return home, and guarantee*****s them a home and safety to return to**.

"The SOS Children's Village in Rafah, which the evacuated children had known as their home, has now been completely destroyed by bombardment*. With no way to return home, and often no safe home to return to, the displacement of Gazans is becoming permanent by design.*

*"We welcome the commitment made by the UK Government and other nation states earlier this week to take further action to support an immediate ceasefire. B****ut the situation is now so dire that we cannot allow the risk of words replacing action. The UK and the international community must continue to increase the pressure for a permanent end to this conflict.*** *Without immediate action, a return home for displaced children and families will no longer be possible."*

Children who couldn't be evacuated from Gaza, alongside additional unaccompanied children the charity is now caring for, are living in an SOS Children's Villages encampment in Khan Younis, with bombs landing as close as 800 metres from their temporary accommodation.

Company Contact: