

The disproportionate vulnerability of older people in humanitarian emergencies

The Oct 13, 2023, order by the Israeli forces for the mass evacuation of 1·1 million people from northern Gaza before an expected ground offensive included those of advanced age or with higher dependency on caregivers.¹ With the population already cut off from basic needs, such as water, electricity, communication networks, fuel, food, and medical services, Médecins sans Frontières—who are active in several hospitals in Gaza—have described the situation as catastrophic.² Older people are disproportionately affected by the war in Gaza, as in all humanitarian emergencies. Previous data collected by organisations, including El-Wedad, Juzoor, and HelpAge International show that 44% of older people in Gaza are completely dependent on family members to meet their basic needs, 80% reported they require medical items or medicines, and 45% were going to bed hungry at least one night per week.³

The order to relocate has dire consequences for older people, many of whom live with pre-existing health conditions or are less able to relocate due to physical restrictions. In Gaza, as previously seen in Ukraine, older people are more likely to be left behind during mass displacements.⁴ This leaves them at increased risk of the effects of war, including intentional violence and reduced access to health services, clean water, and appropriate food. They are also more likely to face worse health outcomes, including death, disability, injury, malnutrition, and poor mental health.^{5,6}

We urge all those involved in wars in Gaza, Israel, and Ukraine, as well as other humanitarian emergencies, to respect international humanitarian law,⁷ which states that older people must be protected as people not

participating in the hostilities. Their specific needs and challenges must be recognised and steps must be taken to ensure that older people are included in relief efforts, honouring the humanitarian imperative of impartiality and providing assistance based on needs and rights alone.

We declare no competing interests.

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