

UNICEF Lebanon | April 2024

## CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE:

# The Impact of Six Months of Conflict on Children in Lebanon

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### OVERVIEW



**344**

People killed,  
including **8 children**



**1,359**

People injured,  
including **75 children**



**90,000**

People displaced  
including **30,000 children**



**100,000**

People do not have  
safe drinking water  
due to damaged &  
destroyed water  
facilities



**20,000**

Students have been  
affected by the  
partial or total  
closure of 72  
schools



**4,000**

Children have  
been impacted  
by the closure  
of 27 health  
facilities

Six months into the cross-border conflict between Lebanon and Israel, hostilities along the border have intensified, marked by near-daily airstrikes that have progressively hit deeper into Lebanon. These strikes have damaged civilian infrastructure and facilities and have resulted in the death of 344 people, including 8 children and 21 women, as well as injured 75 children.<sup>1</sup> This conflict is the latest crisis to impact Lebanon, which has already been devastated by a protracted economic and political crisis.<sup>2</sup> The conflict has reduced access to essential services, such as health and education – worsening an already dire situation for children and their communities. As of the end of April, almost 90,000 people, including over 30,000 children, have been displaced from their homes.<sup>3</sup>

The current conflict has exacerbated a pre-existing education crisis in Lebanon. Up to 20,000 children in the South of the country have had a disrupted school year; with negative impacts on their ability to build the foundational literacy, numeracy and life skills they need for a brighter future. Continued disruption to in-person teaching and learning heightens risks like child labour and early marriage for the most vulnerable children including children with disabilities and girls and adolescent young women. Even before the current conflict, over 700,000 children were out of school and not learning. The continued disruption to education, especially in the South, risks making it even harder for Out of School Children to be in school, for longer and learning more.

By December 2023, 16% of families resorted to sending children to work, up from 11% in April, with Syrian refugee families particularly affected.<sup>4</sup> Access to services, notably public healthcare, is declining due to financial constraints, energy shortages, and a lack of resources and medication.<sup>5</sup> Most wastewater treatment plants are non-functional, leading to environmental degradation and water contamination. The current conflict has only worsened these conditions, leading to a surge in humanitarian needs across the country – requiring urgent action to address the pressing needs of the most vulnerable children.



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1. Data provided by the Ministry of Public Health
  2. The World Bank has deemed Lebanon's economic crisis one of the most severe globally since the mid-nineteenth century. Due to a sharp decline in GDP per capita, Lebanon has been reclassified from an upper-middle income to lower-middle income status in July 2022.
  3. IOM DTM Round 33 (18 April 2024)
  4. Trapped in a Downward Spiral, UNICEF Report 2023
  5. Trapped in a Downward Spiral, UNICEF Report 2023

## CHILDREN'S LIVES UPENDED

The impact of the cross-border conflict has further compounded challenges facing communities in Lebanon, especially children. This includes the impact on wellbeing, long-term health, access to services, and the environment. Despite the relatively low number of registered separated children, the potential for increased displacement looms, as well as heightening the risk of children being recruited and used by armed groups. The prevalence of gender-based violence, including emotional abuse, physical assault, and child marriage, poses a significant threat to the safety and wellbeing of women and girls in conflict-affected areas. Overcrowded living conditions, coupled with movement restrictions and a lack of privacy, exacerbate the vulnerability of girls. Furthermore, the prevalence of male-dominated spaces in communal areas within displacement shelters leaves girls with limited safe spaces in the shelters.

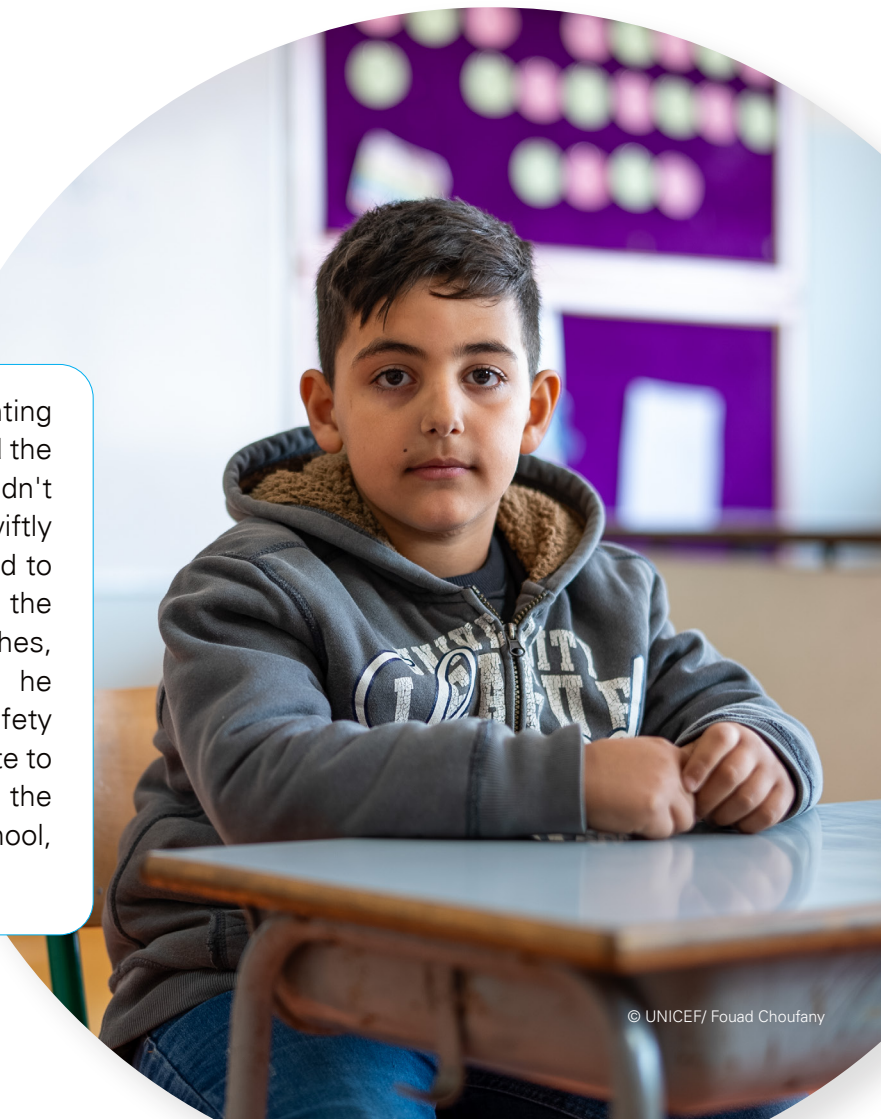
## HIDDEN THREATS

Prior to the current conflict, and following decades of civil and external conflicts, southern Lebanon already contained over 1,200 areas contaminated by landmines and other explosive remnants of war (ERWs), affecting nearly 200,000 people.<sup>6</sup> Children growing up in these contaminated areas are at risk of being impacted by the ERWs but lack knowledge on the risks. The recent escalation of conflict has reignited the threat of landmines and ERWs.

**"I JUST WANT TO GO  
BACK HOME, I MISS IT!"**

Serge, from Kfar Kila.

Serge resided in Kfar Kila, where the haunting sounds of warplanes and bombings shattered the night. Terrified, Serge and his siblings couldn't endure it any longer. Their mother swiftly gathered them, along with their aunt, and fled to Habbouch under cover of darkness. Amidst the chaos, Serge hastily packed essentials - clothes, shoes, and cherished toys. In Habbouch, he found solace in a new school, but safety remained elusive as their family had to relocate to a shelter due to escalating danger. Despite the upheaval, Serge cherishes the shelter and school, longing for the day he can return home.



# A WORSENING WATER CRISIS

The cross-border conflict has damaged or destroyed 9 water facilities serving over 100,000 people. As rates of displacement continue to rise, displaced children, particularly those living in informal settlements, face heightened risks of water and sanitation-related diseases due to overcrowding and inadequate sanitation facilities. Those remaining in targeted villages also risk having limited or no access to water until the damage to water facilities is repaired.<sup>7</sup>

Children and their families in displacement shelters also face challenges, with a recent UNICEF report<sup>8</sup> finding that adolescent girls and women do not feel safe using facilities in what are often male-dominated shared spaces and inadequate sanitation facilities:

- 59% reported feeling unsafe using showers at night, while 44% expressed feeling unsafe every time they used the showers.

These findings demonstrate the urgent need to protect water infrastructure, ensure access to carry out repairs, and prioritize the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable populations, especially girls, in conflict-affected areas.



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6. <https://unifil.unmissions.org/%E2%80%9Cmine-action-cannot-wait%E2%80%9D>

7. OCHA Lebanon: Flash Update # 15- Escalation of hostilities in South Lebanon as of 03 April 2024

8. Situation of Displaced Adolescent Girls and Young Women in the South of Lebanon (January 2024)

# A DISRUPTION TO HEALTHCARE

The cross-border conflict has significantly worsened service delivery in the affected areas in southern Lebanon; health services have been critically impacted, with ten Primary Healthcare Centres (PHCs) and 17 dispensaries partially or completely closed<sup>9</sup> resulting in:

- More than 10,000 people- including 4,000 children are in need of essential services such as immunization, access to critical medications, maternal healthcare, and pre- and postnatal care for affected children and their families.
- Over 16,000 children under five, 17,000 adolescent girls, and 10,000 women living in areas where PHCs have closed are experiencing limited access to vital early childhood development and nutritional services.

# CHILDREN'S INVISIBLE TRAUMA

These dire circumstances underscore the urgent need for sustained humanitarian efforts to mitigate the impact of the conflict on healthcare delivery and safeguard the wellbeing of vulnerable populations, particularly women and children.

The conflict has taken a profound toll on the mental health and physical wellbeing of children and their families, with alarming levels of psychological distress reported. Reports of anxiety and trauma have surged- not only due to displacement, but also in response to the relentless shelling and air raids.

In March 2024, UNICEF conducted an MHPSS assessment in Palestinian communities in Lebanon. The findings revealed that children's exposure to the conflict heightened their risk of developing collective trauma, psychological distress, disrupted development, feelings of hopelessness and despair, social fragmentation, physical health consequences, and inter-generational trauma transmission.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, the looming threat of ERWs further endangers the lives of children and their caregivers. Since the start of the conflict in October 2023, UNICEF has seen a significant increase in trauma amongst children and caregivers, including the following<sup>11</sup>:

- In the South governorate, 46% of parents and caregivers reported their children experienced anxiety, while 29% reportedly struggled with depression.
- In Nabatieh governorate, 46% of parents and caregivers reported anxiety and 33% depression.
- Among Palestinian parents and caregivers across Lebanon, 47% of children expressed anxiety, while 30% reported feelings of depression.

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9. OCHA Lebanon: Flash Update # 15- Escalation of hostilities in South Lebanon as of 03 April 2024

10. UNICEF Report: MHPSS and Wellbeing among Palestinian Children, Youth, and Caregivers in Camps (April 2024)

11. Trapped in a Downward Spiral, UNICEF Report 2023

These distressing statistics reflect the cumulative emotional strain stemming from adverse living conditions, ongoing conflicts, uncertainties about the future, and the traumatic impact of witnessing violence in Gaza, where many have endured the loss or injury of loved ones.<sup>12</sup>

**“I’M SCARED OF THE WAR AND WEAPONS. I HEAR THEM INSIDE THE CAMP, THEY ARE FIGHTING AND SHOOTING EACH OTHER HERE.”**

Child in Burj el Brajneh Palestinian camp.

## THE STRUGGLE TO LEARN

As a result of the conflict, 72 public and private schools have been forced to close, disrupting the education of 20,000 students.<sup>13</sup> The volatility of the conflict and the recent geographical escalation has also affected access to schools, with safety concerns limiting or even denying children access to quality education:

- Over 20,000 school-aged children have been displaced and more than 70 private and public schools are facing operational and security challenges leading to partial or full school closures, affecting both teachers and students.<sup>14</sup> The situation is exacerbated by the damage sustained by several schools as well as the repurposing of schools as shelters for displaced families.
- An unknown number of children remain in conflict zones without safe access to education.
- In TVET schools, students are attempting to continue their education through online learning where possible but face significant challenges stemming from a limited access to resources, a scarcity of digital devices, and logistical constraints.<sup>15</sup>



The ongoing conflict risks yet another lost generation of children who cannot safely access education, leaving them at a heightened risk of resorting to informal or exploitative labor. Immediate and concerted efforts are needed to mitigate these risks and safeguard children’s educational rights and their future prospects.

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12. Trapped in a Downward Spiral, UNICEF Report 2023

13. OCHA Lebanon: Flash Update # 15- Escalation of hostilities in South Lebanon as of 03 April 2024

14. OCHA Lebanon: Flash Update # 15- Escalation of hostilities in South Lebanon as of 03 April 2024

15. DG, TVET, January 2024



## THE COST OF INACTION

As a result of the cross-border conflict, Lebanon's economy is projected to further deteriorate resulting in critical services becoming even more inaccessible to marginalised and vulnerable groups, especially children. In the absence of a permanent ceasefire, the crisis risks another lost generation of children that are deprived of their basic rights and services. The cost of inaction is anticipated to result in the following:

- Health outcomes are expected to worsen, with a surge in vaccine-preventable diseases already evident.
- The risk of a measles outbreaks is significant, with Lebanon being among the 51 countries meeting the global criteria for large and disruptive outbreaks. If routine immunization at health facilities continues interrupted or ceases entirely, the chances of an outbreak will significantly increase, which could prove deadly for children – particularly if their health is already compromised from displacement.
- Significant increases in child stunting and wasting have already been reported, which is anticipated to continue to rise if the conflict persists.
- Further degradation of water systems could lead to a rise in water and sanitation-related illnesses, particularly among children in displacement centres and informal settlements across the country.
- Families in affected areas may face severe water shortages until facilities are repaired after the end of conflict. The potential long-term contamination of water sources with white phosphorus also poses a grave threat to communities.
- The risk of child protection concerns and negative coping mechanisms, such as child labour, exploitation, early marriage, and enduring mental health issues, is expected to increase, especially given the limited child and social protection systems in place in the country.
- The likelihood of increased school dropout rates among children is expected to rise, raising the probability of their involvement in informal or exploitative labour.

Immediate steps must be taken to tackle the multifaceted challenges facing Lebanon's vulnerable children amidst the ongoing conflict. This requires a unified and multi-sectoral approach that prioritizes the safety, wellbeing, and future prospects of children. Failing to do so jeopardizes the potential of children.

**"I WORRY FOR THE SAFETY OF MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY MEMBERS WHO WEREN'T ABLE TO LEAVE."**

Razan, thirteen years old, from Aitaroun.



# UNICEF'S RESULTS FOR CHILDREN



**121,699 people** have been provided with access to a sufficient quantity and quality of water for drinking and domestic needs.



**90,000 displaced people**, including **30,000 children**, benefitted from humanitarian cash transfer and referrals.



**63,845 children, adolescents, and their caregivers** received a package of integrated nutrition and care for child development services.



**24,566 children, adolescents, and pregnant women** have been reached with essential health services.



**4,293 children and their caregivers** received a comprehensive child protection prevention and response package.



**1,106 women and girl survivors of GBV or at-risk** accessed comprehensive prevention and response GBV services through safe spaces.



**4,020 displaced children** previously in formal education were provided with gender responsive and disability inclusive education, learning materials, and access to remote learning modalities.



**8,464 winter kits for displaced children and families** were produced by youth participating in learning and income generating opportunities and distributed to displaced children.



**6,374 individuals** were engaged through integrated messaging on prevention, access to services, and the promotion of positive behaviours.

# UNICEF'S PRIORITIES IN LEBANON

Without a permanent ceasefire, Lebanon is at risk of a full-scale war which would have a devastating impact on the 1.3 million children living in the country today. UNICEF remains committed to responding to the cross-border conflict and adjusting its approach as the situation evolves. In addition, and to ensure that every child can realize their full potential, UNICEF calls for the following:

1

**Prioritizing the protection of children above all else.** The safeguarding of children's rights, safety, and wellbeing in accordance with international humanitarian and human rights law is paramount. Aligned with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which outlines the fundamental rights of children worldwide and sets the standard for their protection, wellbeing, and development, UNICEF calls for a safe environment where children can thrive, free from harm and exploitation, and where their rights are respected and upheld at all times.

2

**Ensuring uninterrupted access to education for children.** All children should have the opportunity to learn, whether through formal or nonformal education pathways. Failure to provide this risks another lost generation. Despite the challenges posed by the cross-border conflict, maintaining continuous learning opportunities is essential to ensuring that every child can access quality education and reach their full potential.

3

**Investing in rights-based, gender-responsive, and inclusive systems designed to protect all children.** Long-term solutions are needed to address the underlying causes of vulnerability among children including multi-dimensional poverty, limited access to critical services, and most recently, displacement. Social protection systems can help protect children's rights including the right to survival and development as well as the right to education. UNICEF therefore calls for investment in social protection systems including cash transfers and grants, programmes to ensure access to services, social support and care services, and legislation and policy reform to ensure all children have an equitable chance in life.

4

**Safeguarding civilian infrastructure, including schools and hospitals.** Advocating in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1998, UNICEF urges all parties involved in the conflict to refrain from actions that obstruct children's access to education and healthcare services, including safeguarding essential civilian infrastructure such as schools and hospitals.

5

**Sustaining the ongoing support of the international community.** Immediate humanitarian assistance is needed to ensure access to essential services such as healthcare, education, clean water, and sanitation. This includes providing medical supplies and supporting PHCs to address the rising health needs, restoring damaged water facilities, and facilitating the continuation of education through both formal education and alternative means including nonformal education and digital platforms.



United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
Lebanon Country Office  
[www.unicef.org/lebanon](http://www.unicef.org/lebanon)