Children Under Siege
SARAJEVO 1992-1993

Just over a year ago, Sarajevo was a proud city of 650,000 inhabitants that reflected Bosnia and Herzegovina’s harmonious ethnic and religious patchwork. Its children played together in lush green parks with little concern about their friends’ religious or ethnic backgrounds.

Today, Sarajevo is a skeleton of its former self with its population thinned to 360,000. ‘Where children once played together in the parks, all that remain are the stumps of trees cut down for firewood in the fuel-starved city.’

The war has taken its toll on the children. There are no accurate figures on the number of casualties, but one source estimates that at least 1,400 children have been killed and 12,800 have been wounded since the start of the war in Sarajevo. UNICEF surveys show that many of the children have been exposed to atrocities and killings and that the majority of them believe they will die in this war. All are suffering from varying degrees of war trauma.

The shells began to fall on 5 April 1992. Over the months, they have crashed onto Sarajevo’s houses and apartments, its hospitals, its schools and its orphanages. Snipers, working in round-the-clock shifts, are gunning down civilians, many of them children emerging from shelters to look for food and water, or just to play. The punishment has been relentless.

Electricity and water are frequently cut off to most buildings, and water must often be fetched from outside wells, which are dangerously exposed. Often, too, it is the children, mainly boys, who leave their shelters to collect water and food for their families. Each time they do that, they take a huge risk.

Until recently, children were unable to go to school, a loss they felt deeply. It is of children an here in Sarajevo without attracting a sniper’s bullet or a grenade. Too many ordinary activities - playing soccer or basketball outside the home, climbing a tree to pick ripe cherries, lining tip for water or bread have ended in tragedy.

Although the winter is over, the spring thaw, normally a harbinger of hope, brings with it new fears - of renewed and widened war, of more atrocities, and of epidemic disease in a city with little running water, a destroyed sewerage system and a population weakened by hunger and sorrow.

Even if such fears prove to be unfounded, the current realities are bad enough continued bombardment, growing hunger, deepening poverty, and disease.

Out of this grim picture, if we are to find hope at all, we can only look to the children. It is the children who will somehow survive the war and go on to build new lives, new communities, new countries. Yet we must ask what kind of countries the children who have lived through this terrible war will build, what kind of leaders they will be, what kind of parent’s. Failure to heal the children’s wounds, to calm their fears and to improve their lives, risks giving rise to yet other wars in the year to come.
Voices from a Siege

"The worst moment was when the paediatric unit was bombed. The nurses told us to run and hurry because snipers were shooting at us from across the street. I was very scared because I wanted to live."

Eight-year-old Ivana, a leukaemia patient at Kosevo Hospital.

"When there was no electricity, we operated by the light of a petrol lamp, almost in total darkness. It was almost impossible to proceed and we had difficulty finding the instruments. Sometimes we had no choice and had to operate on more than five children every day because they were wounded by grenades and shrapnel. It was terrible."

Paediatric surgeon.

"My younger child, a boy, is only one-and-a-half years old and has never known what peace is. One of the first sentences he learned to say was "they are shooting again"."

A mother.

"Sometimes it is the little things that become big problems. My daughter is now two-and-a-half years old. She wets her bed every night. It is a problem for my wife because she has to wash the sheets and pyjamas every day, sometimes when there is no water in the building and no heat to dry them with. And I cannot be there to help her because I must work every night to survive."

A father.

"Many of the children stutter and wet themselves, especially the younger ones. We will have to work hard to treat these children psychologically, to bring them back to normally I after the war. Their whole world has changed, they have learnt different values, not all of them positive. The school can be an anchor for them, if only we can find the strength and the means to help them."

A teacher.

Ivana sitting on her hospital bed. Photo: UNICEF/R2/16/Edith Simmons.
Fourteen-year-old Aleksandar was burnt by a Molotov cocktail. Lying in his hospital bed he said quietly: “When I close my eyes, I dream of peace.” Photo: UNICEF/5138/John Isaac.

An 11-year-old girl who fled to Sarajevo from the suburbs with her mother in May 1992 told a psychologist her story:

The girl and her mother were prisoners in their home for a month. During that time, the girl witnessed the gang-rape of children and women and saw people being tortured and killed.

One day, the girl and her mother were taken outside their home by soldiers. The girl was forced to watch while a woman cut her mother’s breasts and stomach with a broken bottle.

The girl was placed in front of a wall and a soldier fired his pistol at her head. She was only grazed by the bullet because she turned her head when she heard her mother scream.

That night, the girl and her mother managed to flee to the city, where they lived in an abandoned kindergarten. The neighbourhood was being heavily shelled almost every day and there was no other shelter, so they covered in the middle of the room as far from the windows as possible. Later they lived in refugee centres.

The girl displayed all the symptoms of Post traumatic Stress Disorder, particularly when something reminded her of her experience. She also developed a desperate fear that she would not survive the war. She talked of her fear of starving or freezing to death, or of being killed in the shelling.

The girl told the psychologist that telling her story made her feel better. She said she had felt angry for months but had never told anyone of her experience.

‘Then you came and we talked and I became calmer’.

UNICEF child psychologist, Rune Stuvland, comments on the effects of the siege and war on the children of Sarajevo:

“Now that spring has come to Sarajevo, children are playing in the streets and attending school. They seem to cope with the siege, but then, are carrying with them the memories of 13 months of psychological torture - 13 months of constant shelling and sniper’s fire, 13 months old destruction and death. The experience of Sarajevo will never leave them, but through proper support and counselling their suffering can be decreased. That is why UNICEF is training local teachers and psychologists in how to help traumatized children.”

“In my dreams I go among the ruins of the old part of town looking for a bit of stale bread.

My mother and I inhale the fumes of gunpowder and I imagine it to be the smell of pies, cakes and kebab.

Then a shot rings out from a hill nearby.

We hurry, although it is only nine o’clock and we might be hurrying toward ‘our’ grenade.

Then an explosion rings out in the street of dignity.

Many people are wounded

sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers.

I reach out and touch a trembling, injured hand.

I touch death.

Terrified I realize this is not a dream.

It is just another day in Sarajevo.”

Twelve-year-old Edina Suleymanovich. Like most people in Sarajevo, Eden has not eaten meat, fresh fruit or vegetables since April 1992. Her diet consists mainly of rice, pasta and some bread. Edina’s strongest wishes are for peace and to retain to school as soon as possible.
UNICEF in Sarajevo


Recognizing the acute suffering of children and mothers in this war, UNICEF has deployed more than 80 local and international staff members. The staff are specialists in logistics, health, psychology, education, and water and sanitation. In addition, consultants are helping UNICEF with security, adoptions, urban water supply, peace education, and the evacuation of the sick and wounded children from Sarajevo.

UNICEF has 11 staff members in Sarajevo who work with other United Nations agencies and local and international humanitarian organizations to carry out the following vital projects in the city.

Water: UNICEF’s contribution to the city’s survival has been crucial in this area. Sarajevo’s water system relies on pumps to move the water from wells into the mains and to the higher elevations of the city. Many of the pumps have been damaged and the electricity to power them has been sporadic. In addition, many of the city’s pipes have ruptured, cutting the water flow, or increasing the risk of contamination from sewage. As a result, some parts of the city have not received running water since the war began in April 1992. Other areas have had water cut off for a month at a time. When the water is cut, residents must walk several kilometres through dangerously exposed streets to reach the few still functioning wells. People have been killed collecting water. At the same time, residents have had to resort to drinking contaminated water, resulting in thousands of cases of enterocolitis and hepatitis. There is concern that in summer there may be an epidemic of water-borne diseases. UNICEF staff and consultants are working under life-threatening conditions, along with other experts and local water engineers from all sides, to rebuild Sarajevo’s water distribution system.

UNICEF has begun repairs on several pumps that feed water to essential locations. This should soon provide fresh water to some 50,000 residents. UNICEF has also provided the city with a generator, which is now feeding some water into undamaged city pipes. In addition, UNICEF is supplying new pipes, tools, and equipment to repair the numerous major leaks in the city system. Finally in anticipation of the threat of epidemics, UNICEF, in cooperation with the World Health Organization, is distributing water purity, testing kits, chlorine to treat the city mains and individual tablets to treat water collected from outside areas.

Health: The major health concern for the summer is the effect of disrupted sewage systems and unclean water supplies on a hunger-weakened population. Widespread infestations with lice and scabies are likely, and concern has been raised over the possibility of epidemics spread by water, insects or rodent is. UNICEF is pre-positioning drugs to fight water-borne diseases, including typhoid. The immunization status of children in Sarajevo is generally good. UNICEF provides vaccines, cold chain equipment (kerosene refrigerators, cold boxes and vaccines carriers where electricity has been cut), and injection supplies to local health authorities, as well as paediatric drugs and basic equipment to dispensaries, health centres and pediatric hospitals. It distributes gynaecological and midwifery equipment. Finally, UNICEF has helped to evacuate over 90 sick or wounded children to other countries for treatment.

Nutrition: The most vulnerable of Sarajevo’s citizens are undernourished. UNICEF has begun distributing supplementary food and vitamins to the city’s pregnant and lactating women to help them maintain the nutrition levels necessary to have healthy, babies, or to allow them to breastfeed. The programme also covers 0 infants up to one year of age whose mothers are unable to breastfeed, children tip to five years of age whose mothers are either pregnant or lactating, and all children up to 14 years in the most exposed areas. The supplementary food is distributed by UNICEF staff to nine health centres in the city. UNICEF has approved a plan to expand the programme to children up to seven years of age throughout the city.

Education: Formal preschool and primary school education has been totally disrupted in Sarajevo. School buildings serving the city’s estimated 59,000 preschool and primary school students have either been damaged or turned into refugee centres or shelters, and there is a severe shortage of basic school supplies. Nonetheless, throughout the winter, many children have shown a fierce determination to continue with some kind of education, attending makeshift classes set up in the darkened and cold stairwells and basements of apartment buildings. UNICEF is providing notebooks, pencils, chalk and teaching aids for this tempera programme, and proposes to fund and assist the training of teachers to carry out a programme of peace education that promotes cultural and ethnic understanding and tolerance.

Psychosocial support: Almost all children in Sarajevo are suffering from war trauma. A UNICEF survey shows that many have nightmares and display symptoms ranging from apathy to aggression. UNICEF has initiated a support programme that consists mainly of technical advice for the screening of traumatized children and financial assistance for training seminars for child psychologists, teachers, and health and social workers on psychological support to war-traumatized children. UNICEF is exploring ways to reach children through mobile theatres, and special radio and television programming.
The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which came into force on 2 September 1990, less than a year after its unanimous adoption by the United Nations General Assembly, codifies and makes enforceable a comprehensive set of universally accepted legal norms for the survival, protection and development of children. It calls upon governments to respect and promote these rights irrespective of race, sex, religion and ethnic or social origin. As of 17 May 1993, 136 countries had ratified it, making it the most accepted international human rights treaty ever.

The Convention reiterates the provisions of the Geneva Convention of 1949 relating to the protection of children in armed conflict. Article 38 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child declares that States Parties “shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by armed conflict.” Article 39 requires States Parties to “take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of ... armed conflicts.”

The World Summit for Children, held at United Nations Headquarters in New York in September 1990 and attended by representatives of over 150 countries, including 71 heads of state or government, elevated children’s needs to the top of the global political agenda, and recognized the principle of giving children “first call” in bad times, and in good on their countries’ resources.

The Summit also recognized that “children need special protection in situations of armed conflict” and declared that resolution of a conflict need not be a prerequisite to protect children, to ensure their basic needs are met, and to heal their wounds of war. UNICEF has managed to persuade protagonists in recent armed conflicts to open “corridors of peace” or declare “days of tranquillity” to immunize children and provide them with other health services, and relief supplies.

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