

Courage My Friends Podcast Series V – Episode 4
Gaza: Humanitarian Agencies Call for a Ceasefire Now

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STREET VOICE 3: The climate is getting worse. Floods and fires. It's like we're living in a state of emergency.

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: What brought us to this point? Can we go back to normal? Do we even want to?

Welcome back to this special podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute (at George Brown College) and with the support of the Douglas-Coldwell-Layton Foundation. In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

VOICE 4: Courage my friends; 'tis not too late to build a better world.

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the *Courage My Friends* podcast.

RESH: How do we understand the devastating toll of death, destruction and displacement upon the largely civilian Palestinian population, almost half of them children? What of the impossible choices facing aid workers and colleagues on the ground as they are caught within the turmoil of Gaza? Why are humanitarian pauses not enough? And why is a ceasefire the only answer?
I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

In our fourth episode, *Gaza: Humanitarian Agencies Call for a Ceasefire Now*, Dalia al-Awqati, Head of Humanitarian Affairs for Save the Children Canada, and Lauren Ravon, Executive Director of Oxfam Canada, discuss the humanitarian crisis taking place in the Gaza Strip, how aid agencies are assessing the situation and its long term impacts, and how urgently needed and vital humanitarian responses depend on an immediate ceasefire.

Dalia and Lauren, welcome. Thank you so much for joining us.

LAUREN: Thanks for having us on today.

DALIA: Thank you.

RESH: For the last month, the world has been witness to an increasingly catastrophic situation taking place in the Gaza Strip. This most recent Israeli bombardment of Gaza and its Palestinian population, followed the terrible attacks on October 7th by Hamas that killed over 1,400 Israelis, many of them civilians. Meanwhile, over 10, 800 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli strikes, and overwhelmingly they are civilian, most of them women and many, many children. And these numbers continue to grow daily.

So Lauren, could you begin by giving us or adding to this snapshot of the situation?

LAUREN: Thanks for covering this unimaginable humanitarian crisis that we're witnessing.

What is quite exceptional, about the situation that we're facing is that this is a 2.2 million population that is trapped under bombs. And so it is exceptional because in many humanitarian emergencies that Oxfam intervenes in, people can leave the area, have access to roads, to ways of fleeing the violence.

In this case, the population, the civilian population is stuck. And so we have 2.2 million people who have been cut off from water supply, food, fuel, medication. And because of this cutting off of supplies, public infrastructure in the region. So if you think of public health education, waste-water treatment, water purification and clean water access, all of this is collapsing.

So it's a situation where people are being bombed. Every six minutes, a bomb is falling on Gaza. People are being bombed and shelled. The public infrastructure is collapsing. And there is no way for aid to get in. So it's a very exceptional situation and truly heartbreaking.

On top of the 10, 800 people that are killed, as you mentioned, we know that there's thousands that are under rubble. That have disappeared. That are likely dead under the rubble.

Probably close to 30, 000 people who have been injured.

Countless children who are now out of school, running for their lives.

And in this situation, the Oxfam team on the ground in Gaza is not responding to the emergency, they are literally running for their lives. And so a situation where even

humanitarian workers cannot do their job of saving lives because they are themselves at risk of death.

RESH: The numbers are just incredibly astounding and just the situation that has been unfolding in really just over a month has been fast moving and as you say, absolutely devastating.

A few days ago, Secretary General of the U. N. Antonio Guterres described this as "more than a humanitarian crisis, but a crisis in humanity."

He also said that Gaza is "becoming a graveyard for children." Dalia, help us to understand what he means by this and the situation facing the children of Gaza.

DALIA: Well, there are a lot of dimensions to that. The impact of this latest escalation to the conflict on children is, is really grave.

But even prior to this latest escalation of conflict, four out of five children in Gaza reported feeling fear, despair and anxiety. They reported that they don't feel that their parents or the authorities can keep them safe and that they don't feel like the international community has their best interest at heart.

Eighty percent of the children that we surveyed in Gaza, as we released in a 2022 report, were at a mental break already. And that was from the last former escalation of violence.

So as we look today, it's almost 4,500 children killed.

In the first three weeks of the conflict, more children were killed than the annual total of children killed in conflict zones across the world since 2019. That alone gives you a scale of how horrific this has been, and particularly for children.

We see, and we hear from our staff and we see through the news, through social media as well, the impact that this is having, in terms of mental health, but also in terms of people's ability to access their basic needs. We know that children are not able to access clean drinking water.

This is a population, 80% of which already depended on humanitarian aid prior to this latest escalation.

There's 1, 350 children that are missing in Gaza. Many of them feared to be under the rubble. So for those children that may be alive and still buried under the rubble, they're most likely experiencing extreme physical trauma: crush injuries, dehydration, mental anguish and distress. And for those that are with their parents, those that are in shelters, they are experiencing hunger, thirst, also mental trauma.

Our staff members tell us about their own sense of despair and exhaustion and the struggle that they have in comforting their children and providing answers to their children, providing safety. So it's, it really is, just.... The words are not enough to capture this catastrophe.

The fatality rates are incredible. We will continue to see them rise, particularly as no safety exists and as humanitarian assistance at scale is not allowed to enter Gaza. The forecast is really horrific.

RESH: And, you know, as you said, this is a situation that pre-dates October 7th in terms of the living standards in Gaza being far from ideal. Polluted water. To add to that, the unemployment rate was very high, over 60% food insecurity. And as Lauren also said this is one of the most densely populated areas on Earth. And now of course, all of this is so much worse. Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Jolie just said that Gaza is now, "the most difficult place on Earth to live".

Lauren, what are Palestinians facing in meeting their basic needs? And how are they meeting their basic needs? We know of the cutoffs, could you speak more to that?

LAUREN: So I think many of us when we imagine this crisis, we're imagining shelling, bombs, the violence of the attack.

But the violence also comes from the deprivation of access to basic necessities.

Families who might only eat once a day, a small piece of bread, lining up in front of one of the remaining bakeries for many hours to have minimal amount of food to share with your family. Water.. Lining up again for hours to maybe have a small plastic bottle of water - we know that water plants have been destroyed - and then are facing waterborne diseases. So for example, for children, cases of diarrhea and other diseases because there isn't access to safe water.

So it's really a crisis that hits all fronts; physical safety and ability for people to meet their basic needs.

Another issue that we're facing is that the hospital system, the healthcare system in Gaza is near collapse. And so that means that if you're a pregnant woman, if you've just given birth and have a newborn child, you are unlikely to have medical services, because the hospital has either been bombed, is being used as a shelter for people to live in, doesn't have access to electricity. And so, you know, the basic functions of an operating room, for example, are not working. Not access to medication because medication is not coming through in the trucks that used to be able to enter the zone.

So it's on so many fronts.

Shelter ..People not living in safety, living under small tents in the streets. We know that many women have seen their partners killed. Many women and many young girls are now living on their own, which puts them at greater risk.

It's so multifaceted this crisis.

And then you compound on top of all of that the issue of not only fear, lack of services, lack of basic necessities, but also being on the run. We've heard many accounts of these calls for evacuation. So, for example, the majority 1.5 million people in Gaza have had to move south because of the calls of the Israeli army.

And I want to put a point on this, because we hear in the news, the calls for evacuation.

An evacuation implies that there's some sort of order to it, that people are being supported in the move out, they're being evacuated for their safety and therefore, you know, it's a positive thing. The reality is there's no support. These are people that are walking with their children, running for their lives in a very chaotic way, with no guarantee that they will be safe en route.

So it really isn't an evacuation order, but people fleeing. And this continues. And so amidst it all, this flux in terms of population flows, people being displaced into a very small area. So we've heard some of our colleagues are saying 40 of their family members are living in a single home in the South. This is very common.

And also to come back to what Dalia was saying, the incredible impact, psychological impact on populations and then children in particular made me think of one of my colleagues in Gaza who was saying, I think it was about two weeks ago, that her daughter's birthday was coming up and her daughter had been excited about her upcoming birthday. And she was telling her mom that all she wanted for her birthday was to be alive that day. So this is the level of trauma that we're facing, when a young kid is only wish for their birthday is not to be dead.

RESH: You know, it's just so, it's so unnatural, right? For children to have to even conceive of something like that. And yet this really unnatural situation seems to be becoming more and more common. I don't want to say normalized, but more and more common.

Dalia, can you speak more about the multiple impacts of this devastation in terms of that, that grief and that trauma? Because this is happening on both individual but also collective levels, right?

DALIA: Absolutely. There's many dimensions, again, to this. Let me speak to what our report in 2022 had found. It found that mental breaking point, that the severe distress that was already experienced by children was causing them to bed-wet. It was also largely increasing the incidences of reactive mutism. And that was a report published in 2022.

So what we see now and what we know again from our staff and from what our partners are also telling us is the trauma is certainly there, but there is an incessant survival instinct that is really, at play here. That grieving is a luxury that many do not

have, because there is this constant concern of, you know, where is your next meal from? How do you get water, whether it's drinkable or not, for yourself and for your family? What do you do?

One of our staff members from South Gaza spoke a week ago about this moral dilemma that he had when he was going to get water from a well by a mosque. As he was getting water for the 30 members of his family, including his little children in his home, he saw some people that were displaced from the North, and one of those men recognized him.

He recognized him as an aid worker. He recognized him as someone that had helped him in the past. And he came to him and he said, where do I find baby milk? Where do I find formula for my infant? And the man, our staff member, had the moral dilemma of do I help this person that I know is in need, that I know requires this assistance; or do I take the little water that I am able to find and help my own family. And so we see these compounding factors, pre-existing and current, of grief, of trauma, intermixed with a need for survival.

And one of the things that I want to say is we often relate to these conditions in terms of, you know, we talk about post-traumatic stress disorder. But the reality in Gaza is there is no post-. It is in a unique situation and the children of Gaza are in a unique situation.

If you're under the age of 18. You've probably witnessed five escalations of violence. Five severely violent episodes. Five wars in your lifetime if you're under the age of 18.

So you are talking about a childhood that has only known bombardment. That has only known violence, both in its physical form and in its other forms, as Lauren said, deprivation from food, deprivation from water, deprivation from rights, is violence. And we're seeing one of the most extreme episodes of it now.

The Palestinians in Gaza really are in a very, very unique space that I don't believe we've seen elsewhere, where this stress, this trauma is so repetitive. It may not be at the same scale, month after month, but it is absolutely a hallmark of their existence.

RESH: And on top of that, just the sheer exhaustion. Where do you rest? Especially within this last month, where is the room to grieve? Where can you put up your feet? Where do you rest? And this has been again unrelenting for a month, which is added on to the years that you're talking about, Dalia. And now with ground troops moving in, the Israeli government is saying that this will be a prolonged conflict. This is not going to end anytime soon. So from the perspective of Save the Children, where do you see this going?

DALIA: Without international action, without a ceasefire, and with continuous and constant breaches of international humanitarian law, we will continue to see families violently torn apart. We will continue to see these steep increases in death as a

direct result of bombardment and physical violence, but also as an indirect result of a lack of food, a lack of drinkable water, a lack of fuel.

We've been raising the alarm for weeks, not just Save The Children, but humanitarian actors across the board, about what it means to be forced into shelters that are severely overcrowded. So not everyone is staying in the designated emergency shelters that are run by the U. N. Agency for Palestinians, UNRWA, but those shelters are holding hundreds of thousands of people. And in one of those shelters, at least 600 people have to share a toilet. In another one of those shelters, 700 people to a shower. We hear about having to line up for hours to use a washroom, to use a toilet.

But what I'm trying to say here is, as we look at deaths and injuries, we also need to look at hunger. We need to look at dehydration. And we need to look at it as it relates to the projected increase of communicable diseases, particularly in crowded settings.

Again, without an intervention, without a ceasefire, without the ability to deliver aid in an unrestricted manner, we will continue to see not only an increase in death and illness, but we will see a more horrifying death. It will just get worse. Not only will it get worse in its volume, but it will get worse in its gravity.

RESH: Absolutely. On October 13th, as you mentioned, Lauren, the IDF or the Israeli army, had ordered approximately one million Palestinians to move south from North Gaza.

What is that looking like on the ground now? How many people have actually moved out? And is there any place that's safe in Gaza or relatively safe? Where are people going?

LAUREN: So as of today, out of a total population of 2.2 million people, it's estimated that 1.5 million people have been displaced, so have left their homes. And I want to bring this back to a more human level. It's hard to imagine those numbers.

But the Oxfam team in Gaza, we have 35 colleagues in Gaza, 29 of them have left their homes. So have fled towards the south, are no longer living in their homes. Eleven know that their house has been entirely destroyed by bombing, so they will have nowhere to return to. And then a couple of my colleagues have not left their homes. And they've told us that they can't do so because it's just not safe to leave. So it's not safe to stay, but it isn't safe to leave. Making the trek towards the south on foot, maybe with parents that are elderly, young children who can't walk fast, no means of transportation, means that it's even more risky for them to flee than to stay. And some of our colleagues have told us that if they're going to die, they want to die in dignity in their own homes.

So this idea that evacuation is safety, is just not the case in Gaza today.

Then when people have been displaced, the reality is in those zones, there's so little access to public services that it's creating unlivable conditions.

And Dalia was speaking about hunger. Hunger not only impacts you in the moment, but can compromise an entire generation of children. If there's severe malnutrition, it compromises their future lives, their future adult selves.

And we at Oxfam have been talking for several weeks now of the use of starvation as a weapon of war. So it's not just that food isn't available, it's a deliberate decision to starve people by not letting food in.

As of today, only about 2% of the usual food supply that was entering Gaza is getting in.

Two percent.

And so that is not sufficient for the population to live on.

RESH: Now this is also being read in the context of International humanitarian law and human rights. And this was already mentioned by Dalia as well. But Lauren, to continue with you, how should we understand what's happening in the context of international human rights?

LAUREN: So every day we are seeing violations of international humanitarian law. This is a fact at this moment. And this is one of the reasons why Oxfam and Save the Children and many other organizations around the world are calling for a ceasefire rather than a humanitarian pause or humanitarian corridors. Because the reality is that in these circumstances, in the way this attack is being carried out, there is no way to keep civilians safe.

No corridor, no pause will guarantee safety, because people are deprived of resources. So even if you had a pause where you're safe from immediate bombing, that doesn't answer all the other immediate needs that people are facing.

And so depriving civilians of the means for survival is a violation of human rights. And a ceasefire is the only way to ensure that the physical violence stops, but that humanitarian aid can enter in.

And I think Dalia mentioned that before, already about 80% of the population was reliant on humanitarian aid. And so the level of devastation today means that we're going to need so much more aid to respond. That can't be done in a small window, in a small corridor, in a small zone. It needs to be for all of Gaza immediately. The unmet humanitarian needs are so, so high and the international community organizations like Oxfam and Save the Children have the means to respond.

We can respond. We have colleagues, we have staff. We have received donations from generous Canadians to support the response with our partners in the Humanitarian Coalition here in Canada, and yet we cannot access.

And the idea that a humanitarian corridor or a pause in the conflict would be enough to let aid workers in is so misguided because it would be putting our colleagues, humanitarian workers, partners, in direct harm's way. There is no guarantee that they would not then be distributing aid under shelling.

RESH: So this past Thursday, which is actually yesterday for us now, Israel did agree to daily localized four hour pauses in fighting, but you're saying that that really isn't going to make much of a difference?

LAUREN: No, and our experience is that humanitarian corridors and pauses don't work.

I want to come back to another point that might make this more clear. We have seen deliberate communication blackouts in Gaza, four so far. That means that there is no information getting through. So in a situation that is so chaotic, people don't know, don't have access to information.

In a four hour window, between the time you hear of it, you're able to move to whatever zone, move to safety, it might be over, you might be misinformed, and so not even being in the right place. And our experience with these humanitarian corridors or pauses is that civilians get trapped in the wrong place because of misinformation or because there's a deliberate targeting of those safe zones by combatants. And this communications blackout and these communications challenge has a huge impact on the capacity of civilians to actually access whatever service is available in those small times.

But that also means that you know, an ambulance is not only running during the 4 hours of a pause and ambulance needs to be able to operate 24 hours a day. And in these recent communication blackouts, ambulance and humanitarian workers haven't been able to access injured, especially at night because you don't have the information. You don't get the call. You can't make it on time. And so in all of this context of chaos, misinformation, lack of information, just the idea of these temporary pauses or these temporary areas, even if they were respected, how would the population know and how would the population get to them?

RESH: That is a very good point. We have been hearing about these communication blackouts and just sort of the eeriness of Gaza at night, right from early on. All eyes and ears essentially being shut off. Certainly in terms of the cell phone, which has been getting the word out about what's happening on the ground to the rest of the world.

Dalia, both Save the Children and Oxfam are calling for an immediate ceasefire. This call is being echoed by protests around the world, on every continent, including in Palestine. Israel, the United States, and Canada. In Canada, the Federal NDP, Bloc

Quebecois, and a number of Liberal Ministers are also now calling for a ceasefire, as are a growing number of Canadians, according to recent polls. So Dalia, what does a ceasefire mean for organizations like yours? Ideally, what should a ceasefire look like?

DALIA: So a ceasefire doesn't have a, let's say, a strict definition of what it includes necessarily, but for us, for today, a ceasefire would include a cessation of hostilities. A stop to the fighting. And it would need to include unfettered and unrestricted humanitarian access.

So not only do we need the fighting to stop, but we also need to be able to get humanitarian aid into the affected areas, at scale as quickly as possible. That means the ability of humanitarian aid workers to enter Gaza. So additional humanitarian aid workers and medical workers to enter Gaza.

It means the ability for people to move around in safety. It means being able to bring in all essential items. So food, water, fuel, and other humanitarian assistance into the Gaza Strip, to serve people where they are. So the ability for us to, in a safe manner, in a manner that does not risk the life of humanitarian workers or people in need of assistance, bring aid and access aid.

One of the big concerns that we have, even as we talk about humanitarian pauses within the previous context that we were talking about, and the reason humanitarian pauses are insufficient is the scale of the need.

The scale of need in Gaza prior to this conflict was 80% of the population. We're talking about a million plus children that were already in need of assistance. You can only imagine what their conditions are now. And so a ceasefire would allow aid organizations, including Oxfam, including Save the Children, and many, many others that are operational in Gaza, to move around, to bring in essential life-saving items to start treating, with dignity I would add, people that are injured. And the list really does go on.

And so without a ceasefire, the little aid that is able to cross now first of all, does not meet the need that exists, and is not able to effectively reach people that are most in need.

So, you know, we've been talking about Northern Gaza. We've been talking about the illusion of Southern Gaza as a safe space, which we all know is not the case. It is subject to violent bombardment regularly. Many of the injuries that we do see and the fatalities are also in Southern Gaza. So the reality is there is no safe place there.

But a ceasefire would allow us to reach people that are displaced and staying in the hospitals in Northern Gaza. It'll allow us to reach those elderly people that were not able to leave their homes; either were not able to or didn't want to leave their homes. It'll allow us to reach disabled people, many of whom have been left behind because of mobility issues and also because of their unwillingness to leave, or maybe let's say the desire to die in dignity if it comes to it.

And those are, just the basics. Those are just, the minimum needs for responding to what is a humanitarian catastrophe.

RESH: Indeed. And we were hearing or we have been hearing about the trucks on the southern border, the border of Rafah and Egypt. And it's something like 40 trucks, well before this temporary pause. Just to give us an idea, before this, what would be the number of trucks that were coming in to meet the needs of the population in Gaza? Because I'm assuming 40 trucks is nowhere near enough.

LAUREN: Before when it was not an acute humanitarian crisis, we had over 100 trucks every single day coming in. Now, not only is this not sufficient to meet what used to be the baseline, but then all of the additional problems compounded.

So now trucking in water, medication that has been not flowing through for the past month, food. So you can't even compare the before and now. The needs are so much higher than they were. And yet we're still not meeting the amount of aid coming in that used to. And so it really is at this point a drop in the bucket.

And just coming back to the issue of international humanitarian law and the problems that we're seeing and why we're calling for a ceasefire.

One thing that I don't think we've touched on yet is that Israel is recognized as an occupying power in Gaza. And so according to international humanitarian law, Israel has the legal obligation to ensure civilian welfare in Gaza, including providing relief. This is a legal obligation because of that occupying status.

And so at this moment, not only are there the bombardments, but Israel is not living up to that obligation in terms of basic human needs for the population in Gaza.

We also need to point out that the reason that we're calling a ceasefire is because in any conflict, civilians should not be targeted. They should always be protected and aid always needs to be safely delivered.

It is illegal to target civilians or to deny humanitarian relief. So the whole baseline of this conflict is in direct violation of international humanitarian law. And so no pause or corridor will rectify the major violations we're seeing, which are actually at the basis of the strategy now; which is to deny civilian populations aid and basic services.

We also know that it is illegal to be targeting objects that are indispensable to survival of civilians, whether that's a hospital, a water point, etc. And so because of all these factors, we're calling for a ceasefire, not just in relation to the safety, but because the entire basis of this conflict is violating international humanitarian law.

There's also a deep-seated fear for Palestinians that safe zones, even talk of safe zones, could actually signal a new form of permanent displacement of people.

So to say, you know, move to this area, as millions have now had to move to the South, move to this area, and that will be your new reality. People want to live in their homes, on their land, in their community. And so the idea that people will be moved and then permanently re-settled, is a real fear for Palestinians, because it has been their experience over the past half century.

RESH: Speaking of that, this is sort of a tragically familiar picture that we're seeing, particularly of those who are moving en masse towards the South, because this is what we're seeing, well, if we were around 75 years ago, with the original displacement. And many of these people that we're seeing now are the descendants of those people, correct?

LAUREN: Exactly. And so coming back to the trauma that Dalia was speaking about, there's an intergenerational trauma of violence, but of displacement, of dispossession. And so, any discussion now around evacuations, around safe zones, around moving people maybe out of the border, is just adding to that history of displacement and uprootedness. So the trauma there is compounded. And Palestinians are right to be fearful of or questioning the goodwill behind those efforts at moving them to other places, even if it means fleeing immediate bombardment. If you're no longer having access to your livelihood, your community, your home, your house, then that actually isn't a gift of safety. It's a reality of being uprooted once again.

RESH: Social media, as we said, has really brought the situation home for people even a world away. In video after video, we're seeing the destruction, the death, trauma, as well as the resilience of these populations. And these videos have certainly played an important role in building a global solidarity. Dalia, have the protests made a difference?

DALIA: I think they have. I think we need to continue to make a difference in the means that are available to us. So Save the Children, along with other humanitarian partners such as Oxfam, such as many others, have been calling for a ceasefire.

And we do that clearly in direct conversation with our counterparts in the government of Canada. We are also encouraging individuals to be contacting their Members of Parliament to demand an urgent ceasefire. We also have a petition that is circulating.

It is certainly making a difference, but we won't be where we want to be until there is a ceasefire.

As a humanitarian, but also as someone of Palestinian descent, it is so heartening to see the support for humanity, for children, and against abuses of rights of children. But it's hard for me to say it's enough because we know that it's not. Until we see a ceasefire it's not enough. We need people to be calling their Members of Parliament. We need people to be signing petitions. We need people to be doing this every single day, to let our elected officials know that we need them to represent our will we need them to call for a ceasefire.

RESH: Now the images, again sort of going back to the videos because like many people, this is really how I'm learning about what's happening on the ground as well. And the images of entire families being wiped out, parents holding the shrouded bodies of their children, still living children having their names written on their limbs so they can be identified after they die, is, it's just, as we've been saying, it's surreal and it's horrific. And I'm going to put this to both of you, because you're working in this all the time. So first Dalia. In your years of humanitarian work, what does this moment mean to you?

DALIA: Thanks for the question. That's, that's really difficult to answer.

I'm a humanitarian through and through. I always think that the need for justice just courses through my veins. I come from a background of displacement in multiple different ways. And this is one of the worst things that I've seen in my lifetime. In my experience as an emergency responder.

I sit here in Toronto, knowing full well that my family is in the West Bank. My family is in Jerusalem and their experience is very different... I sit here in safety, in relative safety.

I've been to Iraq after the fall of Mosul. I've worked in Bangladesh, in the Rohingya camps, in DRC, in a lot of places, and I can tell you that what we're seeing now is just unprecedented. It really is horrific.

And as someone that is a parent, a first-time mother to a child that's not even two, it - I want to say it's a punch in the gut. It just is a constant weight, a constant knot that you carry with you to imagine that the safety that I can afford my child is something that hundreds of thousands, a million parents are deprived of both in Gaza and across the occupied Palestinian territory.

RESH: Thank you for, for sharing that. I mean, I can't imagine from your perspective what this must be. But it's interesting to hear you say that, certainly you're mired in so many of these conflicts and looking at what's happening to children, but that this is unprecedented.

And Lauren, do you want to come in here as well and talk about what this moment means to you?

LAUREN: Yeah. Thank you for sharing that, Dalia. It's beautiful and heart-wrenching to listen to your experience.

I do feel like this is a turning point for humanity.

The reality of this crisis is that it is testing the limits of our humanity. And if we cannot rally as an international community, as individuals and countries to say Peace must come first, then we are failing in our collective humanity. And I think there's an awareness of that.

The number of people in the streets today, you know, it seems like there's a turning of the tides here and recognizing that we cannot keep down this path. And that any more violence just breeds more violence, more injustice, and that we're at a breaking point. If there's of this, it feels like our humanity will collapse.

And maybe I can share an observation that we've experienced in joining protests in several cities across Canada.

It's been an interesting moment where you've seen different communities come together in solidarity.

I've been to protests where I've seen the rainbow flag. Queer communities standing up for Palestinians. I've seen people of different faiths coming together to say we stand for peace. And I think that is what will get us out of this and what will get us to move forward.

To get not only a ceasefire, but a collective will for peace is that different communities see themselves in the struggle of Palestinian people, but also just generally the struggle in the region of people wanting to live in peace. That is most of our hope.

And so if you see Jewish people, Israeli people, queer people, immigrant communities in Canada showing up at this protest, it shows that there's much more that brings us together than that divides us, and that gives me hope. And I also see that the tides are turning in Canada.

I think you referenced it at the outset, but we've seen polling that now almost 7 out of 10 Canadians support a ceasefire. We were not there even two weeks ago. And so public pressure, sharing the stories of people in Gaza, speaking about the violence and the need for peace is making a difference.

People's opinion of this crisis and of the situation in the Middle East, I think more generally are changing. And I do have hope that politicians will hear that. We'll hear this change of collective mindsets, this call for action. And we'll move.

The problem today is that they're not moving fast enough. And every day is of the essence when a bomb is falling every six minutes, when children are dying every single day.

RESH: Thank you for that. Now the devastation to people and infrastructure as we've been talking about is just huge. And it's difficult to think about where to even begin in terms of a humanitarian response, at least to my untrained eye. Now that these humanitarian pauses have been called, even though that we still very much need a ceasefire. But we have these four hour humanitarian pauses. What are the priority needs? How do you even begin to respond? And again, I'll go to both of you. But Dahlia, could you talk about how do you start?

DALIA: I want to start by saying that the humanitarian pauses that are being considered now, are in place to allow for civilians in the North to come to the South. These are not pauses that are meant for the delivery of aid.

RESH: Thank you for that clarification. If by some chance within the next few days or next week, a ceasefire was actually achieved, and we're hoping for that. How would you then start? How would you begin?

DALIA: A multifaceted approach. We would start by meeting critical needs. So ensuring that - and this is only on the assumption that humanitarian aid at scale is able to get into the Gaza Strip,

Increasing the availability of clean drinking water. Increasing the availability of food supplies. Ensuring that fuel is getting to the hospitals. Ensuring that critically injured children are evacuated to places where they are able to receive the medical assistance that they need because the system as it currently stands is not able to support that.

Ensuring that water, sanitation and hygiene. Emergency water sanitation and hygiene infrastructure is put in place until repairs can be made to the more permanent infrastructure.

Those are just the start.

And of course deploying support for mental health and psychosocial services, both for children and for adults. The effect of this is felt across the population.

And like I said, that is just the starting point if there is a ceasefire and unfettered, unrestricted humanitarian access to scale.

And also it should include the deployment of humanitarian personnel into the Gaza Strip as well. So ensuring that people with emergency response capacity, that are not currently in Gaza, are able to enter, and able to start planning, executing and supporting emergency responses, both by Save the Children, Oxfam and other partners. And in addition, and including, of course, our local Palestinian partners on the ground.

RESH: Thank you. And just to mention again both of your agencies are also part of the Humanitarian Coalition of many agencies that are responding to the crisis. So Lauren, just to bring you in here. Do you want to add to that? What would be part of a planned response in the event that a ceasefire does happen? What would be the priority needs there?

LAUREN: Yeah. Thank you. Coming back to what Dalia said right now, we're not in a position to have any sort of humanitarian response at scale. So we're very much in standby mode.

We have some small scale emergency support with partners and our colleagues in Gaza, but it's very small-scale.

What we would do if there was open access to humanitarian aid, is to coordinate with international humanitarian organizations as we always do. And I can give you the example of the work that Oxfam would be doing in this circumstance.

In humanitarian settings our focus is on water and sanitation. So that can be trucking in water until local water infrastructure is rebuilt. Investing in local water infrastructure. Also investing in waste- water treatment plants. So repairing those. It can be investing in latrines and sanitation facilities in displacement camps while people are still in displacement. So Dalia earlier mentioned, one toilet for 600 people.

There are clear ratios in humanitarian settings for water and sanitation facilities So it would mean that latrines, so it would mean building latrines, ones that have a gender lens -so safe for women and children to access in particular. It could also mean having electricity or solar panels around latrines so that they're safe access.

Another thing that would be really critically important is cash assistance, direct cash distribution to families. So not only providing aid, but helping the local economy come back to life.

So if there's cash, people can be going to local vendors to market slowly. It won't be the only response we will need to be bringing in food, hygiene supplies and other things.

But providing cash to families is a very dignified way to provide aid so that they have agency and choice and what they choose to purchase, but also helping rebuild that local community and economic infrastructure.

And another thing is hygiene kits, including menstrual hygiene kits. So ensuring that women have access to those. It's very challenging in a humanitarian setting if you don't have basic menstrual hygiene.

So those are some of the examples of what the response could look like. But again, we cannot have a response if humanitarian aid workers are under bombs and shells.

And one last point that I would make is that in our efforts as Oxfam, Save the Children, our humanitarian partners, is really working with local communities to deliver aid.

We are far from the days of, you know, the thousands of international aid workers showing up in a country. We really work with local communities.

In this setting, however, it's going to be very challenging because of the high degree of collective trauma, displacement, death and injury in the local community. We will need to have much higher presence of international aid organization and

international aid workers in this context from the region because the reality of our colleagues is that they're injured, they're hurt, they're traumatized. And their ability to reorganize will be important to invest in, but that will take time.

RESH: And just to mention that so many international aid workers, UN workers have also been killed within these strikes as well.

And just to bring in a note, I see that Dalia has also said that part of the initial response should also be search and rescue, because again, as you both pointed out there are still so many who are under the rubble.

Now in everyday conversation, news and video comment sections, a growing refrain among those who are witnessing the catastrophe in Gaza from afar, including here in Canada is, you know, "I feel helpless. I don't know what to do. What can I do?"

Dalia, you've, spoken about contacting our Members of Parliament. Is there anything else you'd want to add to that? And how can people support the work of Save the Children Canada?

DALIA: Absolutely. So certainly contacting Members of Parliament. I encourage my family and my coworkers to do it as often as they can, because it is not exclusive to one time.

But then also donating. It's really quite important. So donating to organizations, humanitarian organizations that are on the ground. So Save the Children, alongside Oxfam, of course, are proud members of the Humanitarian Coalition and people can go to together.ca to donate.

And I think that the last thing is, I always encourage people to keep informed.

We are working at Save the Children, while we're adjusting our own website and our own landing page, to ensure that the accounts that we have been receiving from staff are reflected there, that people have an easy way to really be hearing firsthand, even if it's in small snippets whenever our team are able to send them from Gaza, about what the reality is.

And what the reality is for people that we know 100% are civilians. For people that have families, that have young children, many of them. And so I really do encourage people to be seeking out those narratives.

RESH: Thank you. And Lauren, what can people do in terms of helping to meet the humanitarian need and likewise supporting the work of Oxfam Canada?

LAUREN: So building on what Dalia said, public pressure. Whether it's calling your MP, but also showing up in person at rallies is very effective. We are one of the co-organizers of the Ceasefire Now Coalition that's going to be holding rallies across Canada starting November 12th, but then moving forward. There will be rallies every

weekend. And so would encourage you, regardless of what city you are in Canada, there's most likely a rally - show up to that.

While social media has a huge impact being in person on the streets is something that politicians certainly take note of.

I would also stress the point around donations. We have been working with our colleagues in the Humanitarian Coalition on a joint fundraising appeal and have had the support of the Canadian government to have donations matched.

And it's a difficult one because I think people see that humanitarian aid is virtually on pause right now. And so wonder, you know, what is the need to donate if we don't have the ability to have a large-scale humanitarian response?

And I would respond to that: that now is the time to donate because now it's on everyone's minds. Now it's in the news. Now we have a collective awakening of this crisis. But by the time we're allowed in, that the full humanitarian response gets underway, people might not have this top of mind. And so the donations need to be coming in now so that we have the means to respond.

And this is going to be a very, very long response in terms of rebuilding all the destruction. And so I would really encourage Canadians to keep giving generously to members of the Humanitarian Coalition.

RESH: And we will be linking the sites for your organizations into the show notes for this episode. And with that Dalia, Lauren, thank you so much for joining us.

DALIA: Thank you.

RESH: Since the recording of this episode, Israel has revised the Israeli death toll from the October 7th attacks down to 1, 200. The Palestinian death toll continues to rise.

That was Dalia Al- Awqati, Head of Humanitarian Affairs for Save the Children Canada, and Lauren Ravon, Executive Director of Oxfam Canada.

And this is the Courage My Friends podcast.

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

Thanks for listening.

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