

# An open letter: In solidarity with all children suffering in wars; to all who hold or share a concern for the wellbeing of children

**To the Editor:** Since 7 October 2023, when Hamas launched an attack in Israel, killing over 1 200 people, the response has unleashed a humanitarian disaster of incomprehensible scale. By October 2024, over 43 000 Palestinians, including more than 13 700 children, have lost their lives in Gaza.

These continuously increasing numbers have been numbing our minds for over a year now, but they are not just statistics. All of these numbers are children who once had names, dreams and laughter. They are families erased. Schools and hospitals, meant to protect and nurture and serve people, have become gravesites.

Entire futures are being wiped out in Gaza. Over 11 000 schoolchildren have been killed. Nearly 700 000 children have gone without education for over a year. Their teachers, classmates and sanctuaries of learning have been obliterated. One can only imagine the silence that has replaced the once-boisterous hum of schoolyards.

## A moral catastrophe

When the Secretary-General of the United Nations called Gaza's plight a 'crisis of humanity', it was more than rhetoric.<sup>[1]</sup> It is a call to awaken the collective conscience of the world. The deliberate targeting of civilians, the denial of humanitarian aid and the relentless bombing campaigns all point to a moral collapse – one that implicates us all if we remain silent. This is not merely a war; it is increasingly agreed upon that this conflict has taken the shape of a modern-day genocide.

As we reflect on the history of children in wars, we sadly have to identify and remember numerous moments when humanity failed to act. We remember the children of the Warsaw Ghetto, the massacres of Sabra and Shatila, the Rwandan genocide. These are not just stories of the past; they are warnings for the present.

## The current conflict and the vicious cycle of child abuse

The extent, scale and cruelty of the current ongoing war in Gaza poses serious considerations. The vicious cycle of child abuse has been well documented.

It is rational to assume that the massive psychological trauma of the Holocaust caused havoc in the Jewish culture, and permanently damaged their national identity to such an extent as to harbour an ongoing national fear of repeat destruction. The vicious cycle of child abuse, however, now manifests at a much larger scale and even on a national level, making the previous victims now the aggressor of crimes similar to those which they suffered themselves 80 years ago. Sad as this sounds, it is important to understand that the Holocaust is not a justification, but an explanation, suggesting that the current abusers were abused themselves, harming them to such an extent that they have lost perspective of the acts they are committing.

We therefore acknowledge that pain exists on all sides of this conflict. Trauma has never been the burden of one people solely. Both Israeli and Palestinian people carry with them wounds that run deep, involve transgenerational trauma and perpetuate cycles of violence.

## Response of the international paediatric and paediatric surgical fraternity

The overall response of the international paediatric and paediatric surgical fraternity has, frankly, been appallingly lacking. To contemplate any attempt at healing, the immediate challenge is to stop the bleeding. This is a moment of truth for all of us who care about the welfare and future of children in any future war conflict.

We, as child healthcare practitioners, cannot claim neutrality in the face of genocide. We urge the international paediatric and paediatric surgical fraternity to demand an immediate ending to this current war, and to support constructive peace talks.

As academics, we propose to boycott all institutions that are complicit in this conflict, and terminate any collaboration with all entities that do not condemn these atrocities. Furthermore, we demand full accountability and insist that international laws are enforced, humanitarian corridors opened, and all committed war crimes fully investigated and appropriately prosecuted.

We have to rebuild hope and support initiatives that provide education, healthcare and mental health resources to all children affected. We implore all to raise your voices and speak out against injustice wherever you encounter it. Silence only serves the oppressors. Failure to act immediately will make our proud fraternity of paediatric healthcare practitioners silent onlookers to a genocide unrolling in front of our eyes.

No-one can change the past, but we can shape the future. Let it be one where no child, regardless of nationality or faith, be subjected to living in fear of war, hunger, or death. We could aspire to a future where humanity rises above hatred and division to protect its most precious treasure: children. This is a call for commitment to stand together, united in solidarity, and working for peace, justice and the preservation of human dignity.

**A B van As** 

Honorary Professor of Surgery, University of Limpopo, South Africa  
sebastian.vanas@uct.ac.za

**D Sidler** 

Emeritus Professor of Paediatric Surgery, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

**J H Allema** 

Paediatric Surgeon, Netherlands

**E Leva** 

Professor of Paediatric Surgery, University of Milan, Italy

**G J O Marincowitz** 

Professor of Family Medicine, South Africa

**S Tonkin**

Paediatric surgeon, South Africa

**P C Rose** *Paediatric gastroenterologist, Stellenbosch University, South Africa***S Govender** *Anaesthesiologist, South Africa***L London** *Chair of Public Health Medicine, University of Cape Town, South Africa***J C de Agustin** *Chief of Paediatric Surgery Department, Hospital Universitario de Gregorio Marañon, Spain***C Schimanek***Private Orthopaedic Surgeon, Austria***G de Bruin** *General practitioner, South Africa***O Khamag** *Paediatric Surgeon, University of Cape Town, South Africa***C Peck** *Divisional Head, Department of Paediatric Dentistry, University of the Western Cape, South Africa***M S Almaliki** *Paediatric Specialist, American Mission Hospital, Bahrain***M N Jaffer** *General practitioner, South Africa***K S Hamunyela** *Paediatric surgeon, Namibia***M Arnold** *Paediatric surgeon, South Africa***K Heyns Buckley** *Physician, USA***A Elhosny** *Paediatric surgical consultant, Windhoek Central Hospital, Namibia*

1. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner. 'Gaza is a massive human rights crisis and a humanitarian disaster'. UHCHR, 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2024/01/gaza-massive-human-rights-crisis-and-humanitarian-disaster> (accessed 20 January 2025).

*S Afr Med J* 2025;115(2):e3044. <https://doi.org/10.7196/SAMJ.2025.v115i2.3044>

#oneSAMA | Uniting Doctors for the Health of the Nation



**SAMA 2026**  
**HEALTH SUMMIT**

**Innovate to Elevate: Transforming Healthcare Together**



**Month:** May 2026 | **Host City:** Durban

**For sponsorship & exhibition contact:**  
Lulu Mthimkhulu  
073 604 4962  
lulum@samedical.org

\*Event details to follow\*