

Riad Arar is a Palestinian social worker, and a national advisor for child safeguarding and care. Previously he was the president of the Union of Social Workers and Psychologists in the Hebron governorate. He's also a lecturer teaching child protection, at the University of Bethlehem.

Riad is from Beit Ummar, a village in the Israeli-occupied West Bank but he works in the nearby city of Hebron, about 30 miles south of Jerusalem, which is also part of the West Bank. It's about 40 miles from Gaza.

This interview with Riad was recorded in January 2024

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Thanks Riad for taking time out to speak to Community Care. Tell me about your job and how it's changed since the war in Gaza began in October last year?

Riad Arar: Our work is a difficult change because we stay more than, I'm talking about myself, we stay more than 40 days working from home, like other colleagues also. They are...they did the same. And also because of the checkpoints we are right now after October 7th we are talking about more than 670 military checkpoints, they are separating the West Bank and there are a lot of people they can't move well and safely from area to another area. Yeah. And my village Beit Ummar, it's one of the targeted place that it's closed from all sides and this is the main change that happened. And also regarding to our programme on the ground also it's because we are working in the...in West Bank and in Gaza, and I'm a national advisor for both locations West Bank and Gaza. I have a lot of colleagues in Gaza strip and according to the...before the war we are...we were in daily connection and daily review, review our plan, working, discuss the families, our criteria - it's implemented. We were discussed also the quality assurance in children's and how we can reach our beneficiaries and also provide them all our service and so on.

And after the war there is no connection until now, for example. There's no connection, there's no electricity, there is no phones. Sometimes our colleague, they are using...they are using, they charge their phones by small battery, you know? Because there is no connectivity, there is no electricity there. They live...our colleagues, they live in bad conditions. Some of them, they were...left their places because of the injuries of war, because of bombing, because of shooting and they move from area to another area asking for safety. And some of them moved with their families to SOS villages in Rafah. This is in the south of Gaza. But we still face a lot of difficulties in contacting them and we are right now, we are worried about their life in general.

After also the war, right now we are just focusing on emergency programme. We are working with the people that are affected by the war. We have one project, it's called Multipurpose Cash and with mental health also we are providing cash to our beneficiaries. We are working with more...with more than 5,000 children on our programme and according to the...your knowledge because of...there is no services right now in Gaza, there is no water, there is no medicine, no gas, no heat and a lot of

things have happened, you know? And we consider that our intervention is very important in order just to provide some service to give a chance for people to stay alive and to eat and to buy something if they found these resources in order to buy the basic needs for them.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: What has been the impact of military action on children?

Riad Arar: There are a lot of children right now without care, without care providers, without caregivers right now. They lose their families. It means that they are losing an opportunity to be in strong family with parents. They are separated from their family and their community because they are moving from one area to another area asking for safety. They are losing their education. They are traumatised right now. We are in trauma because of the war, because of the bombs, because of the shooting, the real shooting, because of the attacking from the military soldiers and according to their air plans.

And when we talk about mental health, they need a lot of intervention even individually or even in a group or even family counselling. They need a lot of services right now. They haven't basic needs. When we talk of basic needs we are talking about home, about dress, about teeth, about medicine, about food. There is shortage for everything. And this is the impact.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: And what about where you are in the West Bank?

Riad Arar: Before 7th October there are a lot of NGOs and they are specialists in counselling and mental health and legal aid and the medical aid. They are just working with ex-prisoners, working with their families, encouraging their integration also. And also for their education and their school and their formal school and formal education. And also provide for them their mental health individually and group counselling and also family counselling, you know? And also there are... my previous work, I was with Defence for Children International...it's a human rights and children's association. Also we would document and we would also make international advocacy. We are reporting the fact sheets and we are reporting press release. We are documenting the real stories regarding children and their situation and we are targeting also the human, the UN...but there is an outside Palestine human rights council and other associations.

After October 7th, as I told you, because of the military checkpoint, because of the limitation of our movements, we cannot access to all...we cannot reach all families and the families they cannot access to all of the services around.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: What message would you want to give to the international community? A lot of people are so concerned for what's going on, not just in Gaza but in the West Bank as well.

Riad Arar: We are waiting for justice because we are human. We have names, we have children. We are living until now but also we have hope for the future and we have rights like other people in the world. We have the rights to live, we have the rights to move, we

have the rights to educate and to learn and to contribute other people in the world for development or enhance their social, their economical, their culture also.

We are asking your values to be implemented, not to be a double-standard. When you talk about human rights, you are talking about all the people in the world. Khalaas, it's enough. We are tired. We are looking for justice, peace and freedom. This is our priority and we are looking for advocacy of all the people that are defending all human rights to defend and to advocate and to take our story and painful history in their consideration for upcoming procedures.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Well look, Riad, it's really heart-breaking what you're going through and your people are going through. And we wish you all the best.

Riad Arar: Thank you for your listening. Thank you for your questions. And there are a lot of stories and we are looking for a ceasefire and to give us a chance to recover and to reach all the people that need our help. Thank you.