



STOLEN INNOCENCE

IN November 2023, as the burgeoning winter compounded the death and despair engulfing Gaza, the Israeli military raided al-Shifa Hospital. Its stated aim was to root out Hamas operatives it claimed were operating there. Soldiers moved floor to floor. Doctors, nurses, and medics were rounded up and detained, prevented from tending to patients. Those who could not move were left behind. Among them were at least 29 premature new-born babies. Abandoned. Some lay in incubators that had lost power. Others were placed in makeshift containers — plastic tubs — where they lay cold and almost motionless. When UN workers were eventually allowed to enter parts of the hospital, they moved room to

Colin Sheridan



room in silence, unsure of what they would find. When they came upon the babies, they did not know whether they were alive or dead. Some were only hours old. They had no medical charts and no clear identities. Nor were there any surviving parents nearby to claim them. All needed medical attention. They existed in a liminal space — alive, but barely; documented, but not recorded; born, but not yet belonging. After heated negotiations, Israeli authorities allowed their evacuation.

Above: Some of the children in Gaza, Syria, Ukraine, Lebanon, and Yemen whose lives have been torn apart by war.

Eventually, the babies reached Cairo. But that fractured journey was only the first battle of many they would face. If their parents were alive, they were not with them. If their parents were searching, they did not know where to look. These were children without names, without histories, and with little hope. Only eight have since been reunited with relatives — though not always parents for reasons that need little imagination. One of the fortunate is two-and-a-half-year-old Bissan, reunited with her mother, Sundus al-Kurd, only last week. Most of us can barely survive our children's first sleepover due to worry.

Sundus has spent two and a half years wondering if the baby she barely held after birth was alive or dead, while also having to mourn the death of another daughter, Habiba, who was killed the day Bissan was born. For every reunion like Bissan and Sundus, there are many more silences. The story of those al-Shifa babies is not an anomaly, it is a distillation. As Peter Power, the executive director of Unicef Ireland, puts it: "Children are not simply caught in the crossfire — they are disproportionately targeted, harmed, and traumatised." Today, nearly one in five children globally — more than 473m — live in conflict zones.

The war in the Middle East has plunged millions of children into crisis. According to Unicef, more than 340 children have been killed and thousands injured since the US and Israel launched their attacks on Iran. More than 1.1m people, including nearly 400,000 children, have been forced to flee their homes by Israeli bombing and displacement orders in Lebanon, according to a Unicef assessment. Nearly 90% of that total are living outside shelters, with many sleeping in the street. According to the UN, by the end of 2025, Israeli forces had killed 72,289 Palestinians, including 21,283 children, who represented nearly 30% of all fatalities. Continued on Page 6

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3,000 caught speeding over weekend

Liz Dunphy

More than 3,000 people were detected speeding over the holiday weekend, with one driver caught travelling at 138km/h in a 50km/h zone. Gardaí launched an enhanced road policing operation between 7am last Thursday until 7am today, to clamp down on motorists speeding or driving under the influence of intoxicants. However, there were still tragedies on the roads. A man in his 50s died in a crash in Castletownroche, North Cork, yesterday. Gardaí have issued an appeal for witnesses to the incident which happened at approximately 12.50pm. The male driver — the sole occupant of the car involved — was pronounced dead at

the scene. In Letterkenny, Co Donegal, a female pedestrian aged in her 40s died after she was hit by a lorry at Station Roundabout on Friday. She was treated for serious injuries in Letterkenny University Hospital, but died on Sunday. Their deaths brought the total number of fatalities on Irish roads this year to 44. More than 3,000 drivers were detected for speeding offences during the first four days of the garda roads policing operation, including: ■ One motorist caught travelling at 138km/h in a 50km/h zone on Cashel Rd, Cahir, Co Tipperary; ■ A motorist was caught driving at 98km/h in a 60km/h zone on Daingean Rd, Tullamore, Offaly, on Sunday;

■ On the N4, Doddsborough, Lucan, Dublin, a speed of 117km/h was recorded in an 80km/h zone; ■ A speed of 136km/h was recorded in a 100km/h zone on the N7 at Brownsbarn, Dublin 22, also on Sunday. A total of 138 people were arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs between Thursday morning and yesterday. More than 310 people were detected holding a mobile phone or not wearing a seatbelt over those four days. Every on-duty garda over the long weekend was to be out on road traffic enforcement activity. Gardaí placed an emphasis on detecting those driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Gardaí also urged motorists to take extra caution around pedestrians and cyclists. "Walking home or cycling under the influence of alcohol or drugs can also put you and other road users at risk," a garda statement said.

Religious school pupils' parents divided on ethos

Jess Casey  
Education Correspondent

Four out of 10 parents whose children attend religious-run primary schools want their ethos to change, a landmark survey has found. As part of the first national school survey, the parents of children currently attending primary school, as well as parents of pre-school children, were asked if they would prefer their local primary school to operate under a religious patron or a multi-denominational patron. Preliminary findings from the Department of Education indicate that 40% of parents in religious-run schools would prefer it to operate under a multi-denominational, non-religious patron. Approximately 60% of parents in religious-run primary schools said they

wished to retain that ethos. The vast majority of primary schools (88.3%) remain under Catholic patronage, despite moves in recent years to increase choices for parents. The survey, which included input from 200,000 households, found particularly strong parental preferences for a change from religious-run primary schools across several counties. In Wicklow, almost 50% of parents of children in denominational primary schools expressed a preference for the ethos to change. In Waterford, 45.5% of parents expressed a preference for change, followed by 45% in Cork, 44.1% in Kildare, and 43.7% in Dublin. Although the figures represent a national overview, demand for change is expected to vary based on individual schools.

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