

Gaza today: 'This is only the beginning'

By Ewa Jasiewicz

28 December 2008

As I write this, Israeli jets are bombing the areas of Zeitoun and Rimal in central Gaza City. The family I am staying with has moved into the internal corridor of their home to shelter from the bombing. The windows nearly blew out just five minutes ago as a massive explosion rocked the house. Apache's are hovering above us, whilst F16s sear overhead.

UN radio reports say one blast was a target close to the main gate of Al Shifa hospital – Gaza and Palestine's largest medical facility. Another was a plastics factory. More bombs continue to pound the Strip.

Sirens are wailing on the streets outside. Regular power cuts that plunge the city into blackness every night and tonight is no exception. Only perhaps tonight it is the darkest night people have seen here in their lifetimes.

Over 220 people have been killed and over 400 injured through attacks that shocked the strip in the space 15 minutes. Hospitals are overloaded and unable to cope. These attacks come on top of existing conditions of humanitarian crisis: a lack of medicines, bread, flour, gas, electricity, fuel and freedom of movement.

Doctors at Shifaa had to scramble together 10 make shift operating theatres to deal with the wounded. The hospital's maternity ward had to transform their operating room into an emergency theatre. Shifaa only had 12 beds in their intensive care unit, they had to make space for 27 today.

There is a shortage of medicine – over 105 key items are not in stock, and blood and spare generator parts are desperately needed.

Shifaa's main generator is the life support machine of the entire hospital. It's the apparatus keeping the ventilators and monitors and lights turned on that keep people inside alive. And it doesn't have the spare parts it needs, despite the International Committee for the Red Cross urging Israel to allow it to transport them through Erez checkpoint.

Shifaa's Head of Casualty, Dr Maowiye Abu Hassanyeh explained, 'We had over 300 injured in over 30 minutes. There were people on the floor of the operating theatre, in the reception area, in the corridors; we were sending patients to other hospitals. Not even the most advanced hospital in the world could cope with this number of casualties in such a short space of time.'

And as IOF Chief of Staff Lieutenant-General Gabi Ashkenaz said this morning, 'This is only the beginning.'

But this isn't the beginning, this is an ongoing policy of collective punishment and killing with impunity practised by Israel for decades. It has seen its most intensified level today. But the weight of dread, revenge and isolation hangs thick over Gaza today. People are all asking: If this is only the beginning, what will the end look like?

11.30am

Myself and Alberto Acre, a Spanish journalist, had been on the border village of Sirej near Khan Younis in the south of the strip. We had driven there at 8am with the mobile clinic of the Union of Palestinian Relief Committees. The clinic regularly visits exposed, frequently raided villages

far from medical facilities. We had been interviewing residents about conditions on the border. Stories of olive groves and orange groves, family farmland, bulldozed to make way for a clear line of sight for Israeli occupation force watch towers and border guards. Israeli attacks were frequent. Indiscriminate fire and shelling spraying homes and land on the front line of the south eastern border. One elderly farmer showed us the grave-size ditch he had dug to climb into when Israeli soldiers would shoot into his fields.

Alberto was interviewing a family that had survived an Israeli missile attack on their home last month. It had been a response to rocket fire from resistance fighters nearby. Four fighters were killed in a field by the border. Israel had rained rockets and M16 fire back. The family, caught in the crossfire, have never returned to their home.

I was waiting for Alberto to return when ground shaking thuds tilted us off our feet. This was the sound of surface to air fired missiles and F16 bombs slamming into the police stations, and army bases of the Hamas authority here. In Gaza City , in Diere Balah, Rafah, Khan Younis, Beit Hanoon.

We zoomed out of the village in our ambulance, and onto the main road to Gaza City , before jumping out to film the smouldering remains of a police station in Diere Balah, near Khan Younis. Its' name - meaning 'place of dates' - sounds like the easy semi-slang way of saying 'take care', Diere Bala, Diere Balak – take care.

Eyewitnesses said two Israeli missiles had destroyed the station. One had soared through a children's playground and a busy fruit and vegetable market before impacting on its target.

Civilians Dead

There was blood on a broken plastic yellow slide, and a crippled, dead donkey with an upturned vegetable cart beside it. Aubergines and splattered blood covered the ground. A man began to explain in broken English what had happened. 'It was full here, full, three people dead, many many injured'. An elderly man with a white kuffiyeh around his head threw his hands down to his blood drenched trousers. 'Look! Look at this! Shame on all governments, shame on Israel, look how they kills us, they are killing us and what does the world do? Where is the world, where are they, we are being killed here, hell upon them!' He was a market trader, present during the attack.

He began to pick up splattered tomatoes he had lost from his cart, picking them up jerkily, and putting them into plastic bags, quickly. Behind a small tile and brick building, a man was sitting against the wall, his legs were bloodied. He couldn't get up and was sitting, visibly in pain and shock, trying to adjust himself, to orientate himself.

The police station itself was a wreck, a mess of criss-crossed piles of concrete – broken floors upon floors. Smashed cars and a split palm tree split the road.

We walked on, hurriedly, with everyone else, eyes skyward at four apache helicopters – their trigger mechanisms supplied by the UK 's Brighton-Based EDM Technologies. They were dropping smoky bright flares – a defence against any attempt at Palestinian missile retaliation.

Turning down the road leading to the Diere Balah Civil Defence Force headquarters we suddenly saw a rush of people streaming across the road. 'They've been bombing twice, they've been bombing twice' shouted people.

We ran too, but towards the crowds and away from what could possibly be target number two, 'a ministry building' our friend shouted to us. The apaches rumbled above.

Arriving at the police station we saw the remains of a life at work smashed short. A prayer matt clotted with dust, a policeman's hat, the ubiquitous bright flower patterned mattresses, burst open. A crater around 20 feet in diameter was filled with pulverised walls and floors and a motorbike, tossed on its' side, toy-like in its' depths.

Policemen were frantically trying to get a fellow worker out from under the rubble. Everyone was trying to call him on his Jawwal. 'Stop it everyone, just one, one of you ring' shouted a man who looked like a captain. A fire licked the underside of an ex-room now crushed to just 3 feet high. Hands alongside hands rapidly grasped and threw back rocks, blocks and debris to reach the man.

We made our way to the Al Aqsa Hospital. Trucks and cars loaded with the men of entire families – uncles, nephews, brothers – piled high and speeding to the hospital to check on loved ones, horns blaring without interruption.

Hospitals on the brink

Entering Al Aqsa was overwhelming, pure pandemonium, charged with grief, horror, distress, and shock. Limp blood covered and burnt bodies streamed by us on rickety stretchers. Before the morgue was a scrum, tens of shouting relatives crammed up to its open double doors. 'They could not even identify who was who, whether it is their brother or cousin or who, because they are so burned' explained our friend. Many were transferred, in ambulances and the back of trucks and cars to Al Shifa Hospital.

The injured couldn't speak. Casualty after casualty sat propped against the outside walls outside, being comforted by relatives, wounds temporarily dressed. Inside was perpetual motion and the more drastically injured. Relatives jostled with doctors to bring in their injured in scuffed blankets. Drips, blood streaming faces, scorched hair and shrapnel cuts to hands, chests, legs, arms and heads dominated the reception area, wards and operating theatres.

We saw a bearded man, on a stretcher on the floor of an intensive care unit, shaking and shaking, involuntarily, legs rigid and thrusting downwards. A spasm coherent with a spinal chord injury. Would he ever walk again or talk again? In another unit, a baby girl, no older than six months, had shrapnel wounds to her face. A relative lifted a blanket to show us her fragile bandaged leg. Her eyes were saucer-wide and she was making stilted, repetitive, squeaking sounds.

A first estimate at Al Aqsa hospital was 40 dead and 120 injured. The hospital was dealing with casualties from the bombed market, playground, Civil Defence Force station, civil police station and also the traffic police station. All leveled. A working day blasted flat with terrifying force.

At least two shaheed (martyrs) were carried out on stretchers out of the hospital. Lifted up by crowds of grief-stricken men to the graveyard to cries of 'La Illaha Illa Allah,' there is not god but Allah.

Who cares?

And according to many people here, there is nothing and nobody looking out for them apart from God. Back in Shifa Hospital tonight, we meet the brother of a security guard who had had the doorway he had been sitting in and the building – Abu Mazen's old HQ - fall down upon his head. He said to us, 'We don't have anyone but God. We feel alone. Where is the world? Where is the action to stop these attacks?'

Majid Salim, stood beside his comatosed mother, Fatima. Earlier today she had been sitting at her desk at work – at the Hadije Arafat Charity, near Meshtal, the Headquarters of the Security

forces in Gaza City. Israel's attack had left her with multiple internal and head injuries, tube down her throat and a ventilator keeping her alive. Majid gestured to her, 'We didn't attack Israel, my mother didn't fire rockets at Israel. This is the biggest terrorism, to have our mother bombarded at work'.

The groups of men lining the corridors of the over-stretched Shifaa hospital are by turns stunned, agitated, patient and lost. We speak to one group. Their brother had both arms broken and has serious facial and head injuries. 'We couldn't recognise his face, it was so black from the weapons used' one explains. Another man turns to me and says. 'I am a teacher. I teach human rights – this is a course we have, 'human rights'. He pauses. 'How can I teach, my son, my children, about the meaning of human rights under these conditions, under this siege?'

It's true, UNRWA and local government schools have developed a Human Rights syllabus, teaching children about international law, the Geneva Conventions, the International Declaration on Human Rights, The Hague Regulations. To try to develop a culture of human rights here, to help generate more self confidence and security and more of a sense of dignity for the children. But the contradiction between what should be adhered to as a common code of conduct signed up to by most states, and the realities on the ground is stark. International law is not being applied or enforced with respect to Israeli policies towards the Gaza Strip, or on '48 Palestine, the West Bank, or the millions of refugees living in camps in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria.

How can a new consciousness and practice of human rights ever graduate from rhetoric to reality when everything points to the contrary – both here and in Israel ? The United Nations have been spurned and shut out by Israel , with Richard Falk the UN's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights held prisoner at Ben Gurion Airport before being unceremoniously deported this month – deliberately blinded to the abuses being carried out against Gaza by Israel . An international community which speaks empty phrases on Israeli attacks 'we urge restraint...minimise civilian casualties'.

The Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated regions on the planet. In Jabbaliya camp alone, Gaza 's largest, 125,000 people are crowded into a space 2km square. Bombardment by F16s and Apaches at 11.30 in the morning, as children leave their schools for home reveals a contempt for civilian safety as does the 18 months of a siege that bans all imports and exports, and has resulted in the deaths of over 270 people as a result of a lack of access to essential medicines.

A light

There is a saying here in Gaza – we spoke about it, jokily last night. 'At the end of the tunnel...there is another tunnel'. Not so funny when you consider that Gaza is being kept alive through the smuggling of food, fuel and medicine through an exploitative industry of over 1000 tunnels running from Egypt to Rafah in the South. On average 1-2 people die every week in the tunnels. Some embark on a humiliating crawl to get their education, see their families, to find work, on their hands and knees. Others are reportedly big enough to drive through.

Last night I added a new ending to the saying. 'At the end of the tunnel, there is another tunnel and then a power cut'. Today, there's nothing to make a joke about. As bombs continue to blast buildings around us, jarring the children in this house from their fitful sleep, the saying could take on another twist. After today's killing of over 200, is it that at the end of the tunnel, there is another tunnel, and then a grave?', or a wall of international governmental complicity and silence?

There is a light through, beyond the sparks of resistance and solidarity in the West Bank, '48 and the broader Middle East. This is a light of conscience turned into activism by people all over the world. We can turn a spotlight onto Israel's crimes against humanity and the enduring injustice here in Palestine, through coming out onto the streets and pressurizing our governments; demanding an end to Israeli apartheid and occupation, broadening our call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions, and for a genuine Just Peace.

Through institutional, governmental and popular means, this can be a light at the end of the Gazan tunnel.

Ewa Jasiewicz is an experienced journalist, community and union organizer, and solidarity worker. She is currently Gaza Project Co-coordinator for the [Free Gaza Movement](#).