



THE ENDLESS NIGHTMARE

ONE YEAR IN
GAZA WITH
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The Endless Nightmare

OCTOBER 13, 2023:
ISRAEL IS ORDERING GAZANS TO FLEE SOUTH.
BUT THEY'RE BOMBING US HERE TOO

With each passing day of Israel's unprecedented assault on Gaza, it is becoming more difficult to be a journalist in the strip — caught between the non-stop missiles from the occupation's warplanes, and the near-total loss of power since Israel sealed us off from the world entirely earlier this week. Early this morning, Israel ordered the 1.1 million residents who live in the north of the strip to flee south within the next 24 hours, cleansing the area of Palestinians in preparation for the army's expected ground invasion. As the Palestinian death toll enters the thousands, I feel a duty to keep exposing the world to what Israel is doing here.

One of the cities in the southern part of the strip, toward which many are being forced to flee, is Khan Younis — but here, too, we've been experiencing heavy bombardment from the air as well as from shells fired by Israeli tanks since the early hours of Saturday morning, following Hamas' shock raid across Israel's separation fence. The number of people killed and wounded in this city alone is estimated to be in the hundreds. Refugees from the north have already started to arrive in their thousands; many more have stayed behind in the northern parts of the strip, unable or too afraid to leave.

Samira Qadeeh, a 50-year-old from Khuza'a — a town on the

outskirts of Khan Younis and one of the closest Palestinian localities to Israel's fence — fled her home with her family soon after the bombing began, fearing that the worst would befall them if they stayed put. “The tanks were shelling houses with civilians inside, as if they wanted to kill and erase us,” she said.

“All of the neighbors went out in big groups, the children crying and shrieking from the sound of the shells,” she continued. “I was screaming at people to walk quickly, lest the warplanes fire their missiles toward us.” They eventually found their way to a UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) school in the hope that they'd be safer there, but with the scale of the destruction being wrought on the strip by Israel's bombs, the terror still remains.

“It's not easy to leave your home with your children, and move to an unknown place where you might not be able to sleep and might not have everything you need, but the Israeli occupation doesn't care about that,” said Samira. “All it cares about is murder and displacement.”

Fourteen-year-old Salim Sa'eed is also from Khuza'a, and was at home with his two siblings when the shelling began. “We heard the booms and my sister wanted to look out the window to see if someone was celebrating with fireworks. But I felt that it was a bombardment and not a celebration, so I shouted at her to come inside in order not to get hurt. I sat with my little brother in one room and waited for my mother to come back. The sounds of the bombs never stopped.”

Two nights ago, in the deepest darkness, several families in Khan Younis were completely obliterated. The Al-Shaer and Al-Astal families lost a combined total of more than 20 people, including women and children. Ambulances and civil defense vehicles came looking for people to rescue, but there was nobody left alive.

Khalid Salem, 40, was a close neighbor of the Al-Astals. He was watching TV with his family, when they heard the almighty noise of a missile strike, which partially damaged their own house.

“I heard people screaming loudly outside,” he said. “I rushed out, and was shocked to find that the bombing had targeted the house of our lovely and friendly neighbors. I cried a lot when I heard someone screaming and calling for someone to save him.

“Ambulances and civil defense vehicles came to pull injuries and martyrs from the place,” Salem continued. “Everyone was screaming, all of us crying from the scenes we were watching. The most difficult thing you can ever witness is seeing your friends coming out as burned bodies.”

Salim Sabir, 35, left his home in the Abasan Al-Kabira area with his wife and four children in the early hours of Sunday morning. “The first night of the war was very difficult,” he said. “The sounds of consecutive missiles terrified my children. Some of them couldn’t go anywhere alone in the house, thinking that they would die alone or that we would die and leave them alone. These tragic thoughts that came to my children’s minds made me look for a safer place for them so that they won’t be hurt.”

Sabir and his family, like thousands of Khan Younis residents, sought shelter in UNRWA schools in the west of the city, which are usually considered among the safer places in Gaza — but at least 18 such schools around Gaza have already been badly damaged by Israeli strikes in recent days, two of which were being used as emergency shelters.

“The schools are not suitable for sleeping or staying for several days, but we don’t have alternatives,” said Sabir. “We need a lot of things like

food, drink, blankets, and clothes. Furthermore, there are a large number of people here, and everyone is worried about their relatives and homes and scared about what is happening outside the school. Nowhere is safe in Gaza, but we are trying to survive the war.”

Amid all this, Khan Younis has been suffering from a power shortage since the first day of the war. This is a result of Israel tightening the siege it has imposed on the strip for the past 16 years, and preventing fuel supplies — and water — from entering. In the first four days of war, the power schedule was 3 hours on and 26 hours off, but on Wednesday, Gaza’s electricity authority declared that it was no longer able to keep the power plant running for even a few minutes. Private generators are now the only source of electricity, and these, too, will stop working soon.

Laila Al-Khalid, 45, said that the power outage “doubles the suffering from the war.” “We are trying to feel safe by communicating with the world and talking to friends and relatives outside, but the power cut prevents that,” she explained. “The lack of electricity also leads to a water cut and we cannot do our daily chores. All of it creates a state of constant tension.

“The occupation aims to close off Gaza and isolate us from the world, so that no one can reach us and know what is happening here,” she continued. “This is an ugly policy, added to its longstanding policies of siege. The war, the sound of shells and missiles, and the scenes of martyrs of our friends and neighbors are very painful.”

NOVEMBER 7, 2023:
KHAN YOUNIS CAMP IS FULL OF DREAMS.
BUT EVERY BOMB TURNS THEM INTO NIGHTMARES

Since Oct. 13, when the Israeli army ordered Palestinian residents of northern Gaza to flee to the southern half of the besieged Strip, thousands have taken refuge in the city of Khan Younis — in schools, in the Nasser Hospital, in a makeshift tent city, and in the pre-existing refugee camp. But even in the south, the Israeli bombardment never stopped, and given the extreme overcrowding, the risk of casualties from airstrikes is especially high.

I lived in the Khan Younis camp for eight years as a young girl, surrounded by Israeli soldiers and tanks. Though I did not meet them face to face, I could hear their bullets and smell their tear gas. I hated the sound of the bombs so much. We did not leave the house much because the occupation forces would often shoot at random; once they wounded my 2-year-old cousin in his foot. Yet people in the camp were warm and loving, and I still have many friends there. We shared everything, and I went often with my grandmother to weddings in the camp.

My family and I left the camp in 2000, at the beginning of the Second Intifada, because Israeli bulldozers demolished our home. I loved that house so much; I had spent many beautiful days there with my grandmother, who died before it was destroyed. Despite leaving, my heart remained in love with the house and the camp, and my return visits never stopped. My sister got married in the camp and made her home there, giving birth to two children, Adam and Rital. When I visit her and the children, I remember my own childhood in the camp.

“I hope the war will end so I can visit the mall, the market, the restaurant, and the amusement park,” Rital, now 4 years old, told me during one of our family phone calls in recent weeks. She asked me and her mother to pray for her to “grow up, get a job, and go to work.” This camp is full of dreams, yet my nightmares around my family and all of the camp’s residents are constant.

Established after the Nakba of 1948, Khan Younis refugee camp provided shelter for Palestinian refugees mostly from the cities of Bir al-Saba (Be’er Sheva) and Jaffa, and the village of Al-Majdal in what is now Ashkelon. Anyone who has lived in the camp will tell you about the strong ties they all share due to the common experience of displacement in 1948. They carry the same suffering and pain, and are linked through family bonds. Nakba survivors pass on their stories to their children and grandchildren, and everyone attends the annual Nakba Day activities to commemorate their exile.

Before the war, the camp’s population was around 90,000, the majority of whom already depended on food aid and economic assistance from the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). This aid was coordinated through UNRWA’s 25 facilities in the camp, including 16 school buildings and two food distribution centers covering the eastern and western parts of the camp. With thousands more displaced Palestinians flooding into the camp since Oct. 7, however, the strain on its already meager resources is now exponentially greater.

Marwa Harb, 30, arrived in the camp with her husband and four children after fleeing their home in the north of the Strip. “The place is overcrowded with people,” she said. “I was imagining missiles falling around me, and I was afraid for my children so I tried to keep them close to me. My husband reassured me that the camp would not be

bombed, but I cannot be reassured because the [Israeli] occupation does not care about the lives of civilians.”

But Israel did bomb the camp, including a major bombardment of the Abu Shamala family’s residence a week and a half ago that reportedly killed 22 people and wounded over 100 more. The home, which was totally torn to the ground, stood less than one meter from dozens of others, meaning there were casualties from more than one family.

“I was sitting with my children, feeding them and talking to them, when suddenly heavy missiles fell,” Harb recalled. “The place was all smoke and dust, and the children were screaming. I did not see anything around me except that I hugged my children so that no harm would come to them.”

“My husband was outside and came in screaming that our neighbors, the Abu Shamala family, were being targeted,” she continued. “Their house is only a few meters away from ours, on the street opposite us. We felt very sad for our neighbors. In the camp, we all know each other well and we have continuous social solidarity.”

Fadi Tanira, 34, has also been sheltering in the camp since the war began. “The Israeli occupation was not truthful when it said that the southern Gaza Strip is safe for the displaced people and civilians,” he said. “We have not felt safe since the beginning of the war. There are tens of thousands of citizens in the camp here, all of whom go out to the market looking for bread, water, and basic supplies. But I cannot leave my house to go anywhere without fearing that my family will be bombed. I cannot believe that the occupation is bombing a crowded camp like this.

“Last Friday, I went out with my children and I wanted to buy something for them,” Tanira continued. “The children feel bored

trapped inside the house, and are afraid of the sounds of the bombing. When we were nearly back at our front door, a strong explosion hit the house next to us, belonging to the Al-Satri family. Three people were killed and dozens of neighbors were injured.

“I heard my wife screaming as she came down, looking for our children,” he went on. “I tried to scream to reassure her that they were okay, but she did not hear. The voices of people screaming to save the neighbors made us lose communication with each other. These were very terrifying moments. Targeting the camp in this way is disturbing.”

Amira Mukhaimer, 55, was already a resident of the camp before the war broke out. “I cannot live outside the camp,” she says. “My house was destroyed by Israeli bulldozers in 2000, but I could not leave. I placed a tent on the rubble until another house was built for me. I feel that the camp is a vital place where I can get what I want from medical services, shopping, and schools for my children. I do not need a car to transport me in the camp. I can walk to reach what I need.

“The occupation’s attacks on the camp have not stopped since it occupied our land,” she continued, referring to the Nakba of 1948. “We witnessed displacement and deportation. They destroyed our homes. We ran in the middle of the night to search for a safe place. When [Israel] left Gaza [in the “disengagement” of 2005], it returned to it with wars every year and bombardments from the sea toward the city. Yet we do not want to abandon the camp; we will not leave it except to our land [from which we were displaced].”

NOVEMBER 8, 2023:
GAZA'S HEALTH SYSTEM IS ON THE BRINK OF
TOTAL COLLAPSE

The Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip has left the health sector in the besieged coastal enclave in a state of unprecedented, near-total collapse, according to an investigation by +972 Magazine and The Intercept. The dire conditions were prompted by Israel's intensive bombardment, sometimes targeting hospitals and surrounding areas, along with power cuts, shortages of fuel and medical supplies, and an exponential increase in injuries.

More than half of the 30 hospitals in Gaza have closed completely, according to the Health Ministry. For others, the window of operation remains precariously short: the crisis has pushed many of the remaining health care centers to the brink of closure, rendering them incapable of providing vital medical services. Health care workers and hospital employees fear that, even as casualties rise daily, the health care system will soon be unable to accommodate new patients.

“For several days we have been talking about the lack of fuel and electricity inside the hospital,” Dr. Sobhi Skaik, the director of the Turkish Friendship Hospital in the Mughraqa area in the central Gaza Strip, said in an interview last week. “And now what we feared and repeatedly warned about has happened: we ran out of fuel and the electricity is cut off. The hospital is out of service.”

People injured by the fighting are not the only ones affected by curtailed health care service. Vulnerable people include patients with serious illnesses like cancer and especially pregnant women and infants, according to health care workers. Neonatal care relies on specialized

equipment powered by electricity; the constant power interruptions in Gaza put infants and especially premature babies at risk.

“The power cuts in the nursery create many risks, because there are devices and medicines that need important care and a particular room temperature,” said Dr. Sherine Abed, a neonatologist at Al-Shifa Hospital, who is now serving at Al Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir al-Balah after relocating with her family to the southern part of the strip. “The premature babies need special care that requires operating the devices constantly.”

During an interview, Skaik paused, reeling in disbelief that all contact with patients in Gaza is being severed. “Since the start of the war, many patients could not reach the hospital, but we did not stop serving them,” he said. “Currently there is no follow-up with cancer patients.”

His hospital specializes in cancer treatments and is the only institution that, under normal circumstances, serves adult cancer patients in Gaza. “A cancer patient in Gaza dies three times,” Skaik said. “The first time because of cancer. The second time because of a lack of medicines. And the third time because of being targeted by Israeli warplanes during his treatment.”

Pregnant women and infants

Since the start of the war, miscarriages, premature births, and fetal deaths have increased threefold at the Obstetrics and Gynecology Department at Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City, according to Dr. Abed Abu Hasira, a doctor in the department. Over 50,000 pregnant women in Gaza are living in constant fear of losing their babies as the war rages on.

“The current situation in light of the war is extremely bad for pregnant women,” said Dr. Walid Abu Hatab, an obstetrician and gynecologist at Al Aqsa Martyrs Hospital. Thousands have been displaced, and the widespread damage makes reaching health care centers difficult, hindering regular appointments during pregnancy — especially risky for those in need of care for pregnancy-related or preexisting conditions.

“There are some pregnant women who cannot reach the hospital easily due to the intensity of the bombing,” Abu Hatab said. He recounted the story of a patient for whom the journey to the hospital would normally have taken five minutes; in her condition and with the area destroyed, it ended up taking hours, causing her health to deteriorate. Abu Hatab said he was able to treat the woman and her newborn upon their arrival, but with great difficulty.

In some cases, women must make not only crosstown journeys, but also travel long distances inside the Gaza Strip because they’ve been displaced from their homes. Many structures, especially in Gaza City in the north, are damaged, leaving untold numbers homeless. And, on October 13, Israel warned people in northern Gaza to move south or risk being targeted as militants — a declaration that Amnesty International said could amount to a war crime.

In the wake of the warnings, one of the women to flee the north was 25-year-old Nesma Hajjaj, who was seven months pregnant at the time. “I am from Gaza City,” she said in an interview. “And, because I am pregnant, I was very afraid that there would be a bombing near my house.” Unable to find transportation, Hajjaj and her family walked toward southern Gaza. “Along the way,” she said, “I felt severe pain, labor pain, so I went to Al Aqsa Martyrs Hospital.”

The stress of displacement and war contributed to the premature birth of her child. “My child has now been in the nursery for 10 days under monitoring, suffering from many health problems,” Hajjaj said.

Sherine Abed, the doctor working at Al Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, explained that there were 22 infants currently in the neonatal ward — some of whose families have been unable to travel to the hospital. “Families have many difficulties in reaching and seeing their children due to the conditions of war and the continuous bombing,” she said.

In Hajjaj’s case, she decided to stay at the hospital to be near her child. “I am worried about him and afraid of losing him,” she continued. Hajjaj is keenly aware of the fuel shortages plaguing the remaining open hospitals in Gaza and fearful what the continuing war portends.

“I am shocked,” she went on. “I cannot express how I feel about this situation. Will the generators and devices stop working in the hospital? What will happen to these children and what is their fate? Does this mean that if they survive the bombing, they will not survive the siege and deprivation that Israel imposes on us? I hope that my baby recovers quickly before the hospitals completely run out of fuel.”

Cancer patients

There are more than 10,000 cancer patients in the Gaza Strip, said Skaik, of the Turkish Friendship Hospital. Before the war, the hospital received 550 patients a day, provided chemotherapy treatments to 150 patients, and gave hypnosis treatments to around 130 patients a day.

The Turkish Friendship Hospital is one of 16 hospitals that have shut down amid the war, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza. Others include Beit Hanoun Hospital, Al-Wafa Hospital, and

specialized institutions like the International Eye Hospital.

Like others, the Turkish Friendship Hospital suffered an acute shortage of fuel to power its generators. “Fuel is necessary to operate water pumps and generate oxygen, the preparation of medicines, and the operation of medical devices, as well as the operation of the Internet,” Skaik said. “The hospital is completely computerized, and thus information is lost and it is difficult for us to determine the doses and medicines and follow-up on patients.”

The hospital was damaged when Israeli airstrikes repeatedly targeted its surroundings. The third floor, where two rooms were dedicated to hypnosis therapy for cancer patients, was destroyed. Explosions also damaged parts of the second floor. The bombings prompted evacuations within the facility, with patients being moved into the basement. “A number of patients suffered minor injuries from flying glass and suffocation as a result of these airstrikes,” Skaik said.

The 17-year Israeli blockade imposed on Gaza because of Hamas’s rule over the enclave had already taken its toll on health care supplies. The war and the attendant tightening of the siege by Israel — which cut off fuel, electricity, water, and other basic necessities after Hamas’s October 7 attack — has emptied whatever stocks were available.

“Before the war, there was a great shortage of essential medicines for the treatment of cancer,” Skaik said. “Today there are no medicines for treatment at all, as the hospital has exhausted all cancer and painkiller drugs.”

As the hospital’s ability to deliver services waned, all the patients, medical, and technical staff were asked to leave. At the time, about 70 patients were left at the hospital and in need of follow-ups — including cancer patients receiving specialized care.

“When the hospital was emptied,” Skaik said of cancer patients, “the cases that were classified as serious were transferred to the hospital near the patient’s residence, and the rest of the patients were provided with some medicines and asked to go home or find shelter in one of the operating clinics or refugee centers.”

With the hospital closed and communications cut off, Skaik and his staff don’t know what happened to patients registered there: who is alive, injured, or dead.

Insufficient aid

Located west of Gaza City, Al-Rantisi Hospital for Children is the only health care facility in the Gaza Strip set up to give care to pediatric cancer patients. Currently, said Dr. Mustafa Al-Kahlot, the director of the hospital, there are 70 children registered as patients, along with their displaced families.

Urgent action is required to facilitate the patients’ treatment abroad, Al-Kahlot said: Swift intervention will significantly enhance these children’s chances of recovery. Yet the necessary treatments remain beyond reach in the Gaza Strip.

The need has been acknowledged by outside authorities: the patients had secured medical referrals to leave for hospitals in Egypt before the outbreak of the war, but Israeli authorities are refusing to allow them to be transported out of the strip for treatment.

In an interview, Al-Kahlot painted a bleak picture of pediatric patients grappling with a severe lack of treatment options. Their fear is exacerbated by repeated attacks on the hospital’s vicinity, most recently a November 6 attack that struck the third floor. The damage was

extensive, several were wounded, and four people were killed.

Things have gotten so dire that most hospitals that remain open are running short on basic supplies like cotton suture thread, said Dr. Marwan Al-Hams, director of Youssef Al-Najjar Hospital in the southern Gazan city of Rafah. Any small hospital, he said, would need these supplies for routine daily work.

It is exactly these types of shortages that have been at the center of what little international diplomacy has been undertaken on behalf of Palestinians in Gaza. U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has boasted about getting Israel to let several aid trucks into Gaza at a time.

Asked about the medical aid that entered the Gaza Strip from the Rafah crossing with Egypt, Al-Hams sighed. "It is not enough for one day in a hospital," he said. Half the aid that reached the Al-Najjar Hospital was burial bags, he said, and much of the second half was water bottles and other materials that don't meet the hospital's basic needs.

"They just want to help us with burial and not medicine," he said, "or what we need inside the operating rooms."

In the northern parts of the Gaza Strip, the situation is even worse. The Indonesian Hospital, located in Beit Lahia, has been damaged severely by Israeli airstrikes. The hospital became an international football, with Israel saying Hamas built the facility to disguise military infrastructure and the Indonesian government firing back that it built the hospital for the Palestinian residents of Gaza. Either way, the damages and fuel shortages have severely reduced the hospital's capabilities.

"Approximately 70 percent of the services of the Indonesian Hospital stopped due to the failure of generators as a result of running out of fuel," said Dr. Atef Al-Kahlout, the director of the Indonesian Hospital. He worries that the fuel shortages will interrupt the use of dialysis

machines, potentially leading to the deaths of many patients diagnosed with kidney failure.

The shortages led to what in the West would be unthinkable decisions: choosing between patients who, under normal circumstances, would all be able to survive. Hospitals in the Gaza Strip are forced to identify which cases have higher survival rates and give them the opportunity for surgery or space in intensive care wards.

Al-Kahlout doesn't hide that he and his colleagues have to make these calculations, but he resents it: "We consider this decision one of the most difficult decisions imposed on us by wars."

DECEMBER 4, 2023:
THOUSANDS FLEE KHAN YOUNIS ON THE CUSP
OF ISRAELI INVASION

The last days have been the hardest we have experienced since the war began, here in the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis. Until last Friday, this area was designated a “safe zone” — a farcical description considering the Israeli army has bombed the city non-stop, but one that nonetheless brought an influx of hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians from the northern parts of the Strip, which Israeli troops have directly occupied for more than a month. Now, the army’s invasion of southern Gaza is underway, and residents have nowhere to run.

Early Saturday, Israeli tanks entered the city of Deir al-Balah in the center of Gaza, cutting off Salah al-Din Road — the main highway that runs through the Strip from north to south. Heavy bombardment of parts of Khan Younis soon followed, including the destruction of six residential towers in Hamad Town. As I write this, Israel’s tanks are rolling into the outskirts of the city.

As soon as hostilities resumed on Friday following a seven-day lull, Israeli warplanes dropped leaflets warning residents of the eastern regions of Khan Younis to move to the center. This included thousands of terrified people seeking shelter in hospitals, universities, and schools managed by the government and the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), after the city’s population had swelled to triple its prewar size.

Soon after, the Israeli army began disseminating an interactive map splitting the entire Gaza Strip into 2,400 numbered segments, and telling residents — most of whom are struggling to even maintain an

internet connection — to familiarize themselves with their zone. Then came the next evacuation orders, calling on residents of various areas inside Khan Younis and the surrounding towns of Al-Qarara, Khirbet Al-Adas, Khuza'a, and Abasan to get out.

Some are being instructed to go west, to the coastal area of Al-Mawasi. Others are being pushed further south, toward the Rafah crossing with Egypt. These evacuations appear to be in line with a leaked proposal by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to “thin” Gaza’s population, by forcing hundreds of thousands of Palestinians across the border into Egypt and via the sea to Europe and Africa.

In both locations, displaced families — often fleeing for the second or third time since the war began — are being left stranded on the streets due to a lack of shelter, totally exposed to Israel’s ongoing bombardment of all parts of the besieged Strip.

Salim Mallouh, 55, has been living in Al-Qarara for over a month after he and his family were displaced from Gaza City. Now, they are being forced to move all over again. “We came to stay with our relatives, and we thought the war would end and then we would return to our homes,” he explained. “But instead we have experienced the most difficult days due to bombing and artillery shelling.

“We tried to endure these explosions, but the Israeli army ordered us to leave,” he continued. “My family of over 30 people went looking for another shelter, but we found nothing but schools. I will look for a house or a place in Rafah so that we can be safe.

“This war has not had mercy on anyone,” Mallouh added. “It aims to displace us from our homes and kill us in areas that Israel claims are safe.”

As the attacks intensified, thousands of people fled their homes and

shelters in Khan Younis and moved south to Rafah in search of shelter — largely to no avail. Many have been forced to remain outside, hungry and thirsty, in the cold and wet weather.

“Where do I take my children?” Soha Radi, a 32-year-old mother of four from Al-Ma’ani in the north of Khan Younis, asked despairingly. “It is easy for the occupation [forces] to tell us to leave our homes, but we need to be provided with shelter instead of sitting in the street.”

This war, she continued, is making Palestinians “die a thousand times.” “I do not have any relatives in the city of Rafah,” Radi explained. “When my husband went to look for a place, he told me that the schools are full of displaced people and the streets are very crowded. I do not want to leave my home; I want to die in it.”

DECEMBER 19, 2023:
GAZA’S RESCUE WORKERS ARE HAUNTED BY
THOSE THEY COULDN’T SAVE

“I cannot sleep, not even for one minute. I am constantly haunted by the voices and screams of people under the rubble as they beg us to pull them out.”

This is how Ibrahim Musa, a 27-year-old from Al-Bureij refugee camp in the center of the Gaza Strip, described his life since the start of Israel’s bombardment. Not only is he struggling to survive from one day to the next like everyone else in the besieged enclave, Musa is also one of the more than 14,000 rescue workers comprising Gaza’s civil defense teams, who lead the efforts after each Israeli airstrike to save the lives of those trapped beneath the rubble.

Although Musa has worked in Gaza’s civil defense for five years — including through multiple Israeli aggressions on the Strip as well as times of relative “calm” in which the job involves rescuing people from more routine kinds of emergencies — he has never experienced anything like what is happening now. According to Gaza’s Health Ministry, more than 8,000 people have gone missing since the war began, the vast majority of whom are thought to be stuck under rubble. Many of them have likely died despite the best efforts of civil defense workers like Musa who are unable to contend with the scale of destruction being ravaged upon Gaza in recent weeks.

“We don’t have the equipment to remove the rubble,” Musa explained. “If it’s a building of several floors, there’s not much we can do. It takes long hours and many attempts to make any progress.”

Upon arriving at a scene of destruction in the aftermath of an

Israeli airstrike, the civil defense workers must quickly try to get a sense of what they are dealing with. “We usually don’t know who is stuck underneath or how many people we are looking for, so we call into the rubble asking if anyone is alive who can tell us how many people lived in this home,” Musa said. “We scream until someone hears us. Sometimes we get a response immediately, but often we simply hear groans, which we try to follow in order to save those people.”

A scenario that Gaza’s rescue workers have been encountering regularly is having to try to calm children who are stuck beneath the ruins of their home. “The children call out from the rubble asking about their family members,” Musa continued. “We sometimes lie and tell them everyone is okay so that they don’t go into shock. Other times, they call out to tell us that a family member lying next to them has been martyred.”

For Musa, it often feels like he and his colleagues are fighting a losing battle. “It’s not one or two houses being bombed, but entire residential complexes,” he explained. “The whole area is completely erased and becomes a single pile of rubble. We need to dig with our hands to remove injured people who are still alive. We try to be careful because the weight of the rubble on their bodies could mean that we could injure them, even costing them limbs, in our attempts to save them.”

Ahmed Abu Khudair from Deir al-Balah in central Gaza is another member of the civil defense. Like Musa, he described this war as being “more aggressive and violent” than all of Israel’s previous assaults on the Strip; in fact, he believes that the Israeli army is actively seeking to inflict as much damage as possible on Gaza’s civilian population.

Civil defense workers themselves are not immune to Israel’s attacks: at least 32 have been killed since the start of the war, including seven

members of Abu Khudair's own team. He thinks this is no mistake.

"The occupation forces deliberately target the civil defense and ambulance teams," Abu Khudair said. "I was injured while working at a house that had been bombed in southern Gaza. We recovered the bodies of three martyrs and saved several wounded people, but then the house was bombed again. When I went up to the roof of one of the neighboring houses to search for people, we were exposed to two more missiles."

Musa concurs with Abu Khudair's assessment: "Everyone in Gaza is a target."

Despite regularly working 24 hours straight, civil defense workers are forced to accept the fact that they are unable to save all the people trapped under the rubble. "There is no equipment," Abu Khudair said, explaining that they lack bulldozers for removing large blocks of concrete and electronic devices that could determine victims' locations. "We operate only with human power."

One particularly devastating situation that has been seared into Abu Khudair's memory followed a midnight bombing near a gas station in the southern Gaza town of Al-Qarara. "I went to the site and at first I could not find any victims," he recalled. "Then I heard moaning and headed toward the sound. I dug among the rubble and found two stuck legs, which I freed — they belonged to a 12-year-old girl named Aisha." The girl told him that eight of her family members were trapped under the rubble, in addition to other families, including 9 very young children.

Despite the best efforts of Abu Khudair and his colleagues, they simply did not have the means to save them. He described it as "one of the harshest moments I have experienced — leaving a place knowing

that there are people alive under the rubble, but you cannot do anything for them, and some of them will surely die.”

In addition to trying to save people they don't know every day, rescue workers also have their own families to worry about. Musa has been away from his home and family and working around the clock since the first day of the war, staying at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital with his colleagues.

“During times of war, those of us on rescue teams never know when our days will start or end,” he explained. “For me, my day began on October 7, and it has not ended yet.”

Being away from his family means Musa doesn't know how they are, only receiving updates by phone. “Some days they take shelter in one of the schools due to the heavy bombing of our neighborhood in Al-Bureij camp, and other days they return home,” he said. “My children miss me as much as I miss them.”

Musa has seen his wife and two children only once in more than two months — in the aftermath of an airstrike near their home. “They told me that there had been a bombing of a house in the camp,” Musa recalled. “I was very worried about my family. As the civil defense vehicle drove, we got closer and closer to the street our home is on, until I found myself at the door of our building.”

The bombing, Musa continued, had targeted the home of his uncle, which is in the same building as his own family's home. “I heard everyone screaming and crying. I went looking for my uncle and his children and whoever was in the house. I learned that my 19-year-old brother Abdul Rahman had been with them, but I couldn't find a trace of him. His body had been cut into pieces, and my sister recognized him only from the clothes he was wearing; she had bought them for

him as a gift from Egypt just a few days before the war.

“I saw my kids and wife then, for a few moments,” Musa went on. “They were safe, but terrified.”

Despite the horrors they are facing, Musa and Abu Khudair both find real purpose in their work. “We feel that these are our children, our siblings, our families whom we are saving,” Musa explained. “We feel a sense of victory when we succeed in safely removing someone from the rubble. But when we hear the cries of help from children under the rubble, none of us can hold back our tears.”

“This is our work,” said Abu Khudair. “Even though Israel does not respect international law, the law is on our side and we are protected by the will of God.”

JANUARY 31, 2024:
**‘MY CHILDREN ARE CRYING FROM HUNGER. THIS
IS A WAR OF STARVATION’**

Khalida Abu Ras, 55, is living in a tent in Gaza’s southernmost city of Rafah. One of an estimated 1 million Palestinians — around half of the Strip’s population — now residing in the city, she was forced to flee her home in northern Gaza at the start of the war and has been homeless ever since. “I cannot describe the suffering we are experiencing,” she told +972. “We are living the worst days of our lives.”

Beit Hanoun, her former home in the northeastern corner of the Gaza Strip, was one of the first places to become uninhabitable when Israel’s bombardment began. “Belts of fire surrounded the area day and night,” Abu Ras recounted. “I fled from death with my five children and my grandchildren.”

Over the subsequent months, Abu Ras and her family moved from the very north of the Strip to the very south, but each place they stopped in had two things in common: there was no respite from Israel’s bombings or invading forces, and there was a severe lack of food. The same is true for Rafah: “Every three days we receive food assistance, but it is only assistance — a simple meal that does not satisfy a family of 15.”

Israel’s response to the Hamas-led October 7 attack on its southern communities involved swiftly shutting off the electricity and water it usually supplies to Gaza, as well as sharply restricting the entry of food, fuel, and humanitarian aid — thus intensifying an already crippling 16-year blockade. As a result, basic supplies across the Strip have dwindled while their prices have skyrocketed, rendering what little food is

available unaffordable to many.

“A kilo of salt, which used to cost one shekel, now costs 20 shekels or more [around \$5.50],” Abu Ras explained. “A box of yeast, which cost only 5 shekels, now costs 25 [nearly \$7]. We cannot buy anything.”

International aid organizations are warning of catastrophic levels of hunger. A report by The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) placed Gaza’s entire population in a situation of acute food insecurity, which it defines as “crisis or worse.” According to the UN, 80 percent of all the people around the world facing famine or catastrophic hunger are in Gaza. Palestinians in the north of the Strip have told CNN they are eating grass and drinking polluted water, because no aid is reaching them.

The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) — the main organ providing aid and shelter for millions of displaced people inside Gaza, and which has just had its funding slashed by Western countries amid allegations that 12 of its 13,000 staff in Gaza participated in the October 7 attack — stated earlier this month that “humanitarian aid alone cannot meet the essential needs of [Gaza’s] people.” And every day for the past week, dozens of Israeli protesters have been attempting — with some success — to block the passage of what little aid Israel has authorized to enter the Strip from its territory.

Salem Al-Murr, a 35-year-old father of three from Gaza City, has been displaced three times since the start of the war. With each displacement, finding and purchasing food has become an even greater challenge.

“We have not eaten fruit since the beginning of the war,” he told +972. “The price of meat has doubled. A kilo of beef was 35 shekels,

now it's 90 [around \$25]. These prices are unreasonable. We cannot afford them under the harsh conditions of war. One house now has more than 30 people living in it. How can we buy enough food at these prices?"

Al-Murr and his family are now living in a tent close to the Egyptian border. "We don't have anywhere else to go to," he lamented. "I can't believe I'm living in a tent. It has been a painful journey."

Despite now living among hundreds of thousands of displaced people in what has become a tent city, and being in the closest possible proximity to the aid convoys entering Gaza from Egypt, Al-Murr and his family are still suffering from extreme hunger. "Sometimes I go to the market to buy food, but I come back empty handed because everything is too expensive," he explained. "When we ask why prices are so high, they say that the goods are missing from the market and there is no alternative [supply source]."

"We have been without work for more than three months, we have no income," Al-Murr continued. "We are forced to eat one meal a day — the canned goods that we get from aid organizations. No one can afford to buy anything for his family. I see children here crying from hunger, including my own children. We cannot tell them that there is no food. This is a war of starvation and displacement; it is a war against the people and a punishment for them."

People in Gaza are increasingly turning to social media to demand the entry of more aid so that they can buy food for their children and save them from starvation and famine. Meanwhile, the impossibly high prices have even prevented hospital patients from accessing food.

Khaled Nabhan, from the Jabalia refugee camp in northern Gaza, was hospitalized with severe fractures in his foot as a result of an Israeli

airstrike on the camp. He was first taken to Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City, before being transferred to the European Hospital in Khan Younis. There, he explained, he only eats one meal a day — “labneh or bahteh [rice with milk], and it’s not enough. I’m hungry for hours every day. My family tries to buy some food in the area, but everything is too expensive. There is no treatment, no food, no shelter, nothing to enable us to endure this painful war.”

FEBRUARY 9, 2024:
**‘WHAT USE IS THIS COURT IF IT CAN’T STOP
THE WAR?’ GAZANS REACT TO ICJ RULING**

On Jan. 26, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued a preliminary ruling affirming a “plausible” risk that Israel is committing genocide in the Gaza Strip. While a final ruling on the matter could take years, the Court issued six provisional measures aimed at forcing Israel to scale back its assault. The Court did not, however, opt to call for an immediate ceasefire, as many had hoped it would — not least the 2.3 million Palestinians in Gaza.

Indeed, among residents of the besieged enclave, as among Palestinians and their supporters around the world, reactions to the ruling were mixed. Some saw the Court’s decision to intervene at all as a major step forward in the acknowledgement and protection of Palestinians’ human rights. Yet the decision not to call for a ceasefire — which South Africa, the country petitioning the Court, had urged — struck many in Gaza as a failure to do the bare minimum, enabling Israel to continue ravaging the Strip and its population.

As Palestinians in Gaza continue to ache for an end to the war, desperately awaiting news of a breakthrough in the mediated negotiations between Israel and Hamas, +972 spoke to people in the north and south of the Strip to hear their perspectives on the Court’s decision. The overwhelming sentiment was dismay, which has only deepened in the days following the ruling as Israel appears to have taken no notice whatsoever of the Court’s provisional measures.

Kamal Al-Yazji, 23, was displaced from the neighborhood of Al-Daraj in Gaza City when his home was bombed. He has since been

staying at Al-Rimal School in Gaza City, which is run by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Al-Yazji used a famous Arabic proverb to describe the ICJ's ruling and the international community's reaction to it: "The hand in water is not like the hand in fire" — in other words, the judges issued their ruling from the safety and comfort of The Hague, and would likely have called for a ceasefire if they were in Gaza themselves.

"Every second in the delay of a ceasefire leads to the killing of a soul, a human being, to the destruction of a house, the destruction of a family," he said. "It causes unbelievable hardship and sorrow to more children."

Abu Malik, a 45-year-old lawyer displaced from the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood of Gaza City and now sheltering in Al-Shifa Hospital, agreed: "The world has failed to provide justice for the Palestinians since 1948, and it continues to ignore us in its silence."

"Over 100 days of war have not been enough to make the world recognize our enduring plight," he continued. "More than 30,000 dead Palestinians [including the several thousand who are missing and presumed dead] and 70,000 more wounded are not enough to convince the world that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza? South Africa's case against Israel was a reason for hope. That someone is listening to us. But frankly I did not expect a positive ruling from the ICJ, like an immediate ceasefire or ordering humanitarian aid to be permitted to enter the northern parts of the Strip."

Fahmi Al-Rubai, 32, is from the Shuja'iya neighborhood and has been displaced several times since the war began to different areas of Gaza City. "We were hoping that the Court's decision would lead to some pressure on Israel to stop the war, but a few days after the

preliminary ruling, on Monday [Jan. 29], we awoke to intense gunfire in our area.”

“I don’t know who can help us,” he added. “I don’t know who can stop the war. If the ICJ fails, we have no one but God.”

Mustafa Majdi, from Shuja’iya, lost 47 family members in Israeli airstrikes in mid-November. “All of them were civilians,” he told +972. “I was hoping the ICJ would order an immediate ceasefire, so I could bury my relatives who are still under the rubble. What use is this court if it cannot stop the war or force Israel to allow me to bury my family?”

Amein Abedalal, a 45-year-old from Shuja’iya, has been displaced to the nearby neighborhood of Al-Sha’af. He had hoped that the ruling would lead to an increase in humanitarian aid, but this has not transpired. “Israel doesn’t care about law or international pressure,” he lamented. “Our situation did not improve at all after the ruling. I can only hope that more daily aid will come in.”

Abu Ramzi Jendia, a 65-year-old staying in the Palestine Stadium in Gaza City — the national soccer ground that has been converted into a shelter for displaced people — is slightly more optimistic. “There is now hope that the pressure on Israel will lead to a full ceasefire that will persist for the people in Gaza,” he said.

“Although the ICJ did not order a ceasefire, we felt that there is someone who cares about us in this world,” he continued. “At least we felt that the world was beginning to feel our pain.”

“Since the beginning, we have been waiting for international intervention to stop this hideous war,” said 45-year-old Anwar Awad, who is currently residing in the southern city of Khan Younis. “We cannot sleep day or night. It’s as if we are just waiting for death.”

“When South Africa announced that it was filing a complaint with

the ICJ, we were happy that there was hope — that there was someone who might force Israel to stop this war and save the civilians and the children of Gaza,” Awad continued. “We waited a long time. And the Court’s decision affirmed that this is a war of genocide against civilians in the Gaza Strip. But we need a clear and frank order for a ceasefire.”

“When the judge at the ICJ was talking about what Israel has done to the civilians in Gaza, the displacement and starvation — all this was broadcast all over the world, and we felt that our voice was being heard and that the world would know now what we have been going through,” he went on. “This war is harder than any war that we, our parents, or our grandparents have ever experienced. I hope the world will stand by our side and save us from it.”

Sanaa Barbakh, 37, was displaced with her family from Khan Younis in the days following the Court’s ruling as Israel expanded its ground invasion. “A week ago, I left my home in Khan Younis refugee camp for the Al-Mawasi area in Rafah,” she explained. “I live in a tent now. I am a mother of five children: they crave food and they are all sick, but we have no medicine and I cannot help them.”

“We hoped that the Court would directly call for a ceasefire, but that wasn’t the case,” Barbakh continued. “If the decision had been a ceasefire, we would not be living in such terrible conditions now. For us, the civilians, it is not our fault. The war has robbed us of peace and security. We have lost our families, our homes, everything. We need someone to force Israel to end this war.”

Munir Akar, 50, was also displaced after the Court’s preliminary ruling. “We want a ceasefire, an end to the war,” he said. “We want international delegations to enter the Gaza Strip and see what the war has done to us civilians. I was forced to leave my home in the western

part of Khan Younis with 50 members of my extended family. There was no water, no electricity, no food. I could not even provide bread to my family. Will the world accept this?”

“The Court hearing was very important, and it drew the world’s attention to the heinous crimes happening in Gaza, but we need to end this war,” Akar continued. “Wars do not benefit anyone, they only increase destruction and violence. We need peace. Peace is the only solution. Stop this war for the sake of our children.”

FEBRUARY 21, 2024:
AN ODE TO MY SCHOOL, DESTROYED BY ISRAEL

Before the war, I was a full-time science teacher. I did some journalistic work in parallel, producing stories about social issues and all the beautiful things in Gaza. Now, I find myself working as a full-time journalist, reporting on the destruction of my school and the killing of my students.

It was something of a coincidence that I started teaching at the Rosary Sisters School, a private Catholic school in the Tal el-Hawa area of Gaza City. After graduating from university nine years ago, I began working with AlNayzak (Meteor) Foundation as an educational trainer: I would go into private and public schools to provide guidance in the sciences for the staff. In 2019, Meteor asked me to go to Rosary Sisters, which had recently built new biology, chemistry, and physics labs — facilities that remain all too rare in the Gaza Strip.

I had only been there one day helping set up the equipment in the labs when the principal, Sister Nabila Saleh, asked me to stay and teach fourth- and fifth-grade science. I accepted the offer immediately, having long wanted to teach young students. It was an auspicious beginning, and it turned out to be one of the most rewarding professional experiences of my life.

I love teaching and forming deep connections with my students. In class, we are serious so that we can learn, understand the materials, and achieve high scores in exams. For the sciences especially, intensive and continuous study and concentration are required. Outside of class, though, the students and I are close. Despite our age gap, I would consider us to be friends.

My home in the school is the science labs. Anyone who needs me can find me there. The students love it there, too: at the beginning of the school year, I draw up a study plan for each class and make sure that there are days we'll spend in the labs conducting experiments. Even so, during almost every class, the students beg to be allowed to work in the labs.

The remarkable educational opportunities that the school provides — including the labs — are due in large part to the work of the principal, Sister Saleh, who made a great effort to build and completely modernize the school's facilities. Sister Saleh and the devoted and talented staff hoped to make it one of the best private schools in the area. And indeed they have: since the school was founded in 2000, its student body has grown nearly tenfold, to over 1200 students of both Muslim and Christian backgrounds.

Yet the fact that the school exists in the Gaza Strip means that no matter how much work and devotion is poured into it, the risk of destruction is never far away. During the previous war, in 2021, my lab was badly damaged when the Israeli occupation forces targeted the school; the reconstruction work took nearly a year. Classrooms and other school buildings were also damaged, requiring more intensive reconstruction — some of which wrapped up just weeks before the current war began.

In addition to the physical damage, this destruction was devastating on a personal level: the school is my second home, where I spend eight hours every day.

But the damage to the school during the 2021 war cannot be compared to the complete destruction of the current war. When the war broke out, the school year — which had begun in late August — was

immediately canceled, and classes have been unable to resume since. During the subsequent four and a half months, more than 80 percent of the school's buildings have been destroyed.

In November, while Israeli forces were present in the Tal el-Hawa area, they entered the school with bulldozers and tanks, demolishing the school yard and destroying the wall surrounding the campus. The library — which was filled with books, equipped with a number of laptops, and had a television screen for interactive lesson displays — was bombed, and it burned to the ground. Only ashes remain.

The elevator that was built last year was burned and destroyed, as was the school theater, where we gathered for the most beautiful moments — from graduation ceremonies to national, cultural, and religious celebrations. Israeli tanks and bulldozers even destroyed the kindergarten toys. These are hideous, bloody acts of retaliation.

I was shocked when I saw the images of the damage caused to the school. It is an educational institution; there is no political or military goal that could be achieved by destroying it. Seeing years of hard work be wiped out is indescribably painful.

Since the beginning of the war, I have been experiencing intense anxiety for the well-being of my students. I care about them not just as a teacher but as if they were my own children. When Gaza City and the rest of the northern Strip began to be displaced en masse, I thought of my colleagues and students: Where are they? What's happened to them? I had a terrible fear of losing one of them.

Unfortunately, these fears came to pass. I lost two students, Habiba Jarada and Salma Al-Atrash, both of whom were 12 years old and in the eighth grade. Each one had a unique and beautiful personality: they were active, intelligent, affectionate, and sophisticated. Both children

were in the midst of developing a strong sense of self and their academic abilities.

Habiba was constantly checking in and comforting those around her. She would always ask me, “How are you doing? The most important thing for me is that you are happy.” When I was tired from classes and the students had exhausted me, she would say, “Who’s making you tired? Just tell me.” Israel killed her during the early days of the war.

Salma, who was always full of laughter, first became my student a year ago. Shortly thereafter, I also began teaching her brother, Muhammad. He once said to me, “My sister Salma tells me that you are a good teacher, and that I will learn to love science as much as you do.”

Muhammad was a distinguished student, always competing with his friend Omar. He used to tell me that he wished he could take four science classes. After Salma surprised me by dyeing her hair blue, Muhammad would always ask me whether I liked it.

Salma was martyred during a bombing in Gaza City in October. Her family, including Muhammad and their mother, are missing under the rubble — I do not know if they survived.

I still think about the children’s mother, who once beautifully described to me the deep investment parents must make so that their children can reach the greatest academic heights. In Salma she has lost her beautiful and gentle daughter, whom she devoted 12 years to ensuring had a good life.

Some of my students have sent me messages of reassurance on Facebook. I have taught more than a thousand students over the past five years, but only a few of them have managed to reach out to me since the start of the war. Although I am constantly worried for each and every one of them, I am relieved that those who sent me messages are

fine and still alive. Some of my students have been able to leave Gaza, and I am grateful that they survived this terrible ordeal.

I have also met a number of my students who were displaced to the same areas as me in southern Gaza: some in the coastal area of Al-Mawasi, and others in Khan Younis' European Hospital, where they have sought refuge with their families. Seeing them brought me great joy, and I hugged them tightly.

Their circumstances are brutal and arduous. They wanted to talk to me, to complain to me about their pain. They told me that they try to shelter inside and avoid going outside, so as not to fall victim to Israel's missiles. Their faces were pale, their bodies exhausted, and their hearts terrified of the war.

Like my students, my colleagues at the school are also struggling greatly. There is a WhatsApp group that we use to communicate and check in on each other. All of the teachers have lost something dear to their hearts, a painful void that cannot be filled. Each one has lost their home, and many have lost several, or even all, of their close relatives. But these teachers are strong and pray daily for our survival and for the war to end.

I, too, hope that the war will end and that I will return to my work at the school. Each night I dream that I go back to school and that everyone is fine. I hope that this dream will soon come true — for me and my students.

Last month, I found my sixth-grade student Sarah sleeping in one of the corridors at the European Hospital. When she opened her eyes, she shouted to her mother, "Teacher Ruwaida is here!" Her mother thought she was dreaming, but Sarah insisted it was real. She ran to me, her eyes full of tears, and embraced me. She asked if the school year

would be repeated: “Have we lost a year of our lives?”

I told her that first we want the war to end, and then we can think about such issues. She told me that the most basic tasks have become very difficult: she hardly gets the chance to use the bathroom, and cannot shower. The one thing that enables her to hold on to a remnant of her previous life is the Internet, which she uses to communicate with her classmates and friends.

She asked me to send them all a message telling them that I’m fine. I agreed, but she had one further request; despite the horrors of the last few months, Sarah has held onto her sense of humor. In addition to letting the students know I am okay, she asked me to answer one more question: “When is the next science exam?”

MARCH 14, 2024:
**WITH NO SAFETY IN RAFAH, PALESTINIANS ARE
FLEEING BACK TO GAZA'S DECIMATED CENTER**

Rafah is nearing breaking point. The small city on Gaza's southern border with Egypt has swelled in recent months to accommodate approximately 1.5 million Palestinians displaced from all over the besieged Strip. Residing predominantly in hastily erected and poorly insulated tents, and starving from the severe lack of food, every family here has a heart wrenching story of loss and survival. The fear of what's still to come, though, is overpowering.

Rafah was supposed to be a "safe zone," a haven in which to seek refuge from Israel's relentless bombardment and ground assault. But this was never really the case: Israel has been bombing Rafah the whole time. Now the airstrikes are intensifying — even targeting the tent encampments — and the Israeli army's long-threatened invasion of the city appears imminent.

On March 2, an Israeli airstrike killed at least 11 Palestinians living in tents next to the Emirati Hospital in the Tel al-Sultan neighborhood, west of Rafah's center. Mahmoud Ahmed, 36, was nearby with his family. "We were sitting and talking in our tent when suddenly we heard the sound of a powerful explosion and felt the tent being blown aside," he told +972.

"My son was playing with the neighbors, and I rushed out screaming and looking for him," Ahmed recounted. "After an hour, he came back crying and shaking. He had been near the site of the bombing, and out of fear he forgot where our tent was."

Aya Rous, a mother of four who is also 36, was already living in

Rafah with her family before the war started. “At first we thought Rafah was safe,” she explained. “We took in many relatives displaced from the areas that the army ordered them to leave. But suddenly, life in Rafah changed. Places started being targeted more. Now, we are afraid to leave our home. There are no safe areas here.”

On March 9, Israel bombed Burj al-Masry — one of the largest residential towers in Rafah, which was home to approximately 300 people — after warning the residents to evacuate. And it was nearby to where Rous is living: “This tower is huge, and around it are schools sheltering thousands of displaced people. Everyone rushed out in fear, screaming and looking for another safe place. The missiles didn’t succeed in destroying the whole building, but does that mean we’re safe? Of course not.”

As a result of the intensification of Israel’s bombings in the city, some Palestinians who took refuge in Rafah have fled to areas further north. “The displaced people who were sheltering with us in our home went elsewhere in the Al-Mawasi area,” Rous explained. “They became afraid of the city and felt that they were in danger.

“We are all terrified that we will experience what we saw in Gaza City, Khan Yunis, and other areas of the Gaza Strip here in Rafah. Where will we go to find safety? All we can do is pray daily for the negotiations to succeed and for the war to stop.”

“We came to Rafah because [Israel] said it was safe,” Rana Al-Louh, a 35-year-old mother from Gaza City, told +972. “We couldn’t find a house to rent because the city was already overcrowded, so we pitched a tent in the Tel al-Sultan area [west of the city center]. Thousands more displaced people did the same, and before long the area had turned into a tent city.”

Al-Louh explained that she lives in a daily state of tension and fear due to the continuous bombing of the city. “Recently, the targeting has increased everywhere,” she explained. “The sounds of shells and missiles never stop. Sometimes I imagine the sound of a missile landing and where it will explode.

“Even worse is targeting the tents,” Al-Louh continued. “They know that the tents contain displaced people who left their homes looking for a safe place, but unfortunately there are no exceptions for anyone. I fear constantly that the bombing will reach me. I’m afraid of losing my children. We are all targets.”

Her daughter, Balsam, is 9 years old. “She asks me every day when we will return to our home,” Al-Louh said. “She keeps telling me she misses her room and her toys, and she complains about the lack of food.

“In the Emirati Hospital, where I took her because she was sick, she saw a child who was martyred,” Al-Louh went on. “She screamed and cried for her. She was terrified, and ever since then she has been dreaming of that girl and asking me, ‘Am I going to die like her?’”

On March 3, Rania Abu Anza, 32, lost her husband and their infant twins along with 12 other relatives in an Israeli airstrike on a residential building in Rafah’s eastern Al-Salam neighborhood.

“I gave birth to my two beautiful children after 10 years of fertility treatments,” she told +972. “I spent so much money to make this birth successful. So many injections. Once I knew I was pregnant, I took such good care of my health for the pregnancy. My husband accompanied me like a shadow so that I wouldn’t get tired. He tried to provide me with everything I needed — medicines and food.

“At the beginning of the war, I was eight months pregnant, and he

tried to calm me down so that I wouldn't worry, which might affect my pregnancy," Abu Anza continued. "But two days after the war began, I needed an emergency C-section. At the end of the eighth month, I gave birth to my two children, Wissam and Naeem. All of my relatives who lived with us in the building took care of my health and supported me to successfully give birth. We were so happy with these two children, and my husband worked all day for NIS 20 (around \$5.50), in order to provide milk and diapers for the children.

"On the night of March 3, I was at my mother-in-law's house," she recounted. "Everyone was helping me with the children, and I fell asleep. Suddenly, I woke up to the sound of people pulling me out of the rubble. I was screaming, looking for my husband and my two children, but I found them all martyred. I wished I had been, too. I do not know how I will live without them.

"This heartbreak will remain with me forever. We were planning for the month of Ramadan, and how to take care of our children. Now I am alone, without any of my dreams."

In mid-February, Benny Gantz, a member of Israel's war cabinet, announced that Israel would invade Rafah if Hamas did not release the remaining Israeli hostages by the start of Ramadan. This threat, along with the intensification of Israel's attacks on the city and the difficulties of living for a sustained period in a tent, has led some Palestinians who had sought refuge in Rafah to flee north to other parts of Gaza.

Munther Matar spent two months in Rafah before returning to live in his partially destroyed home in Al-Maghazi refugee camp, in Gaza's central area, at the end of February. He originally fled the camp in late December after Israeli airstrikes leveled an entire block, killing more than 80 people.

“I feared for my family, especially since I have a child suffering from quadriplegia; when he is afraid, his body stiffens and becomes heavy and difficult to move,” Matar told +972. “I decided to move to Rafah after the [Israeli] army said it is a safe area.”

In Rafah, Matar couldn't afford to buy his family a tent of their own, so they lived in one belonging to his in-laws in the west of the city. “But then all my children fell ill because of the conditions in the tent, and my daughters became infected with head lice,” he explained. “It was difficult to use the toilet in the tent camp, and with the constant Israeli threats of an invasion, I decided to return to my home in Maghazi. I wanted to spend Ramadan at home, too.”

Before returning to the camp with his wife and children, Matar went to the area to make sure it was safe and that it would be possible to find water. He sealed off two rooms that were badly damaged in Israel's December attacks, and moved his family back in to the rest of the house. “I cannot describe the difficulty of life in a tent,” he said. “It cannot be compared to living in a house — even a damaged one.”

“The most difficult thing is to keep moving from one place to another and adapt to the new conditions each time,” said Umm Muhammad Haloub, who has now fled three times since the war began along with her husband and the families of their three married children: from Beit Hanoun in the north to Deir al-Balah in the center; from Deir al-Balah to Rafah; and from Rafah back to Deir al-Balah.

The family made the decision to leave Rafah after Feb. 13, when the Israeli army fired an artillery shell at tents near where they were sheltering in the west of the city, wounding several Palestinians. “We survived these attacks once, so I pressured my husband and children to return to Deir al-Balah,” Haloub explained.

Raed Al-Shafei fled to Rafah in early November with his wife and five children amid Israel's bombardment of Nuseirat refugee camp. "It was very difficult to find a place to take refuge because Rafah was very crowded and there is no empty spot in the city," he said. "But one of my neighbors saw me by chance; he hosted me in his tent and allowed me to put up a tent next to it."

After 45 days, however, Al-Shafei decided to return to Nuseirat — despite the risks entailed. "I began to hear about the threats to invade Rafah by the Israeli army, as well as hearing about the return of many [Nuseirat] camp residents. We were told that the conditions are calmer there, even though there is no safe place. To live in your house is better than a tent, where there is no dignity."

Al-Shafei left his tent standing in Rafah and gave it to a neighbor from the camp, who insisted on staying in the southern city because his home in Nuseirat had been destroyed by Israel's attacks. "The tent was left standing for any future reason, as the situation in this war is unstable," Al-Shafei added. "We do not know what the Israeli army will do."

APRIL 8, 2024:
SIX MONTHS OF THIS CRUEL NIGHTMARE

Six months have passed since Israel's cruel war on the Gaza Strip began, and my life became one continuous nightmare. Six months with virtually no access to electricity or water. Six months without knowing what happened to countless family members, friends, and colleagues. I long for the daily routine and moments of calm that we used to complain about. For just one hour of that boring normality.

We have run out of energy and our bodies can no longer bear it. The sounds of explosions do not stop. I have grown afraid of the sound of a speeding car, or anything that resembles the terrifying noise of a falling missile. Our house in Khan Younis is constantly shaking, and the doors make a banging sound as if someone is hitting them repeatedly with their fists.

I have given up on looking for any glimmer of hope that the war will stop and this pain will end. I stopped watching the news recently for fear of seeing scenes that make me feel even more afraid and restless at night. I don't want to know anything about the ceasefire and hostage exchange negotiations because I'm starting to feel that there's no point to any of this.

The past month of Ramadan has added to our difficulties. Ramadan used to mean moments of religious devotion, family visits, going out in the evening to the markets, buying clothes for Eid, and hearing the sounds of the call to prayer from the mosques. But those mosques, markets, and shops no longer exist.

Every day, we search for food with which to break our fast at night, and wonder whether we will find anything at a reasonable price. We

miss sweets a lot these days, as well as the special Ramadan drinks. We also miss the decorations that used to light up the house during this holy month. My father put them up this year without saying anything, to try to make us feel some vestige of those beautiful days that we remember so fondly. But the decorations are not illuminated, because there is no electricity.

Being unable to communicate with friends and colleagues has been painful, but it at least shielded me from knowing what happened to many of them. Two weeks ago, a local communications crew succeeded in repairing the transmission tower next to us, and I learned a lot of bad news.

My colleague, Bayan, a music teacher, lost her 5-year-old daughter, Naya. Bayan had escaped from Beit Hanoun in the north to Al-Mawasi in the south with her two children, Layan and Naya. In late December, the family were bombed: Bayan was injured, and Naya was killed when three pieces of shrapnel were lodged in her body in dangerous areas, including near her heart and liver.

Another colleague, Jawaher, called me in floods of tears a few days ago to tell me that her 25-year-old son, Walid, had been killed. He went into the city of Khan Younis to sell okra on the streets and never returned, and Jawaher was later informed that he had been martyred. She told me that her heart was burning, but she was trying to be patient and strong. She said she regretted leaving her home in Al-Bureij camp in central Gaza to flee from the Israeli tanks: she thought they would escape death, but couldn't have known that death was waiting for them in the south.

Although we live in constant fear of Israeli attacks, and are terrified that the army will carry out its plan of invading Gaza's southernmost

city of Rafah, our greatest fear and anxiety is for the future of Gaza. There is nothing that gives us hope that the future will be better.

I wonder about my life after the war. What will become of Gaza? Will we go back to work? Will our friends and colleagues stay here or will they try to start a new life elsewhere? How will Gaza be rebuilt? Is the destruction too great? How long will it take? Will we live the rest of our lives without education and healthcare? How will we get used to life without the places we love and are accustomed to?

Thinking about life before and after the war makes me crazy sometimes. My heart hurts a lot and I feel like I will burst into tears. I don't know how I will be strong enough to bear all of this. Even as I write these words, the sound of explosions is ever-present. The house has not stopped shaking. The front door is almost out of place.

I pray that the war will end so that we can think about what comes next, and have the energy to contend with the new suffering that awaits us in getting used to life in a devastated, ruined Gaza.

APRIL 11, 2024:
‘THE COLORS AND JOY HAVE DISAPPEARED’:
GAZANS RETURN TO DECIMATED KHAN YOUNIS

Thousands of Palestinians have returned to the city of Khan Younis in recent days after the sudden withdrawal of Israeli forces on Sunday. What awaited them was a scene of total devastation, such that many were unable to even recognize their old homes and streets. Entire neighborhoods have been decimated by bombing, shelling, and bulldozing, leaving barely a trace. Khan Younis is now a city of rubble and ash.

Before the war, the city and its surroundings were home to approximately 400,000 people, making it the Gaza Strip’s second largest municipal area after Gaza City. That number more than doubled within the first weeks of the war, as Israel ordered all residents of the northern Strip to evacuate southward, even as it kept bombing Khan Younis. When Israeli troops fully besieged the city in early February, many Palestinians were forced to escape through a so-called “safe corridor,” which entailed abuse and humiliation for those who made the journey.

With the army vacating Khan Younis in recent days, the city’s former residents were eager to return after two months or more to see what was left of it. Walking the once bustling and now virtually indiscernible streets, many were shocked by what they found.

“I am a son of this city, but I no longer recognize its streets,” Ahmed Suleiman, a 35-year-old from Khan Younis refugee camp, told +972 Magazine. “I arrived at the Bani Suhaila roundabout [one of the city’s main intersections] and saw great destruction, just a pile of sand — it looked like a desert.”

Suleiman, who has been seeking refuge in Rafah after fleeing Khan Younis, described what he found when he reached the refugee camp: “All the single-storey houses were entirely gone, leaving only houses with several floors which showed severe damage from shelling and burning. When I arrived at my apartment building, the door had been destroyed and some of the windows were burned and broken. I entered the building and checked one floor after the other. They were all completely charred. My apartment is on the fourth and final floor; looking at it from the street, I hoped that it might be fine. But when I got there, I found a lot of damage.

“I began to remember the moments I had with my children in this house,” he continued. “I searched a lot for my children’s toys so I could bring them back something from home. I found only a few, some of which were burned and others broken. I took what I could and gave them to my children.”

While inspecting his home, Suleiman met with several of his neighbors who had also returned to see the damage. “Many of them were in a state of shock and sadness from the severe destruction,” he said. “We were asking, Whose house is this? Where did that shop go? How do we find that street? When I saw videos of the city on social media, I would say that the destruction was not that bad. But the reality is different. It’s very scary. You feel that you are in a painful nightmare.

“The city has become gray from the destruction and rubble,” Suleiman went on. “The colors and joy of the city have unfortunately disappeared. I don’t know how I will return with my children and live here without a home. My apartment is completely destroyed. There is no infrastructure in the area. I will wait a little until some of the basics of life return to the city, then I will put up a tent next to the house

until it is rebuilt.”

“The city looks like a wilderness area now,” Hanadi Al-Astal, 40, told +972 upon her return to the Khan Younis. She fled the city in December, relocating to the nearby European Hospital where she and her husband work, along with their five children.

“Every day I used to say that I would return to my home soon,” she said. “I was waiting for the moment the army withdrew, so I went with great eagerness after they left on Sunday. I was praying that it would be fine, that I would be able to sleep in my home once again. But while walking along the road, I found great destruction. The streets have turned to sand. I could see some remnants of the petrol station, but it has been completely bulldozed.

“When I approached my house, I saw horrific destruction, and I became very afraid of what I would find inside,” Al-Astal continued. “I was shocked. I entered the house and found it burned. There were no rooms left. The kitchen was burned in its entirety. I searched in what was my children’s room for their clothes and anything useful that I might find. I cried a lot. My heart was burning with all this destruction. I couldn’t believe it. Khan Younis has become a nightmare. It is not fit for life at all.”

When Al-Astal returned to the European Hospital with the few items of clothing that she had managed to recover, her daughter was overjoyed. “She was very happy with them, as if they were new clothes that she was seeing for the first time,” she recounted. “They were her clothes that she used to wear a lot, but she was losing hope of ever seeing them again. She asked me to look for some more of her things, but I don’t know if I will be able to go there again. The house is not suitable for living in.

“My head will explode from thinking about the future,” Al-Astal added. “I don’t know what we will do. Will we go back and put a tent there? Will I travel outside Gaza? I need a lot of money to be able to leave. I don’t know what we’re going to do.”

Mamdouh Khader, 33, said that when he returned to Khan Younis after a two-month displacement in Rafah, he walked around for three days in order to see as much as he could of what remained. “I could not believe the destruction I saw,” he told +972. “Many landmarks were removed from the city. My neighborhood was completely destroyed; it was a mountain of rubble. I could not find my house.

“There was a playground opposite our house that had been completely bulldozed and became mountains of sand,” he continued. “I searched for the mosque next to our house, and it was a pile of rubble due to the bombing that hit the area. I walked toward Nasser Hospital along a sandy street, which had been bulldozed, and sand covered the gates of the schools next to the hospital. The cemeteries behind the hospital had also been bulldozed. I was walking around and asking, What is this area? Where is that place?

Despite the vast destruction, Khader is determined to return to live in the neighborhood that was once his home. “I was very tired during my displacement in Rafah, waiting to return to my city at every moment,” he said. “Unfortunately, the occupation has distorted this beautiful city. I do not know how it will rise again and return to its vitality. The destruction is enormous and cannot be described in words. But I will wait for the water lines to be extended in the area, and I will put up a tent and sleep in it with my children.”

MAY 8, 2024:
‘THE SCENES OF THE NAKBA ARE REPEATING’:
RAFAH IN PANIC AS ISRAELI INVASION BEGINS

Israel’s long-threatened invasion of Rafah has begun. Under cover of intense aerial bombardment Tuesday morning, Israeli forces moved into Gaza’s southernmost city, which has become a shelter for 1.5 million Palestinians with nowhere else to go. This is the moment they most feared, carrying the potential for a catastrophe greater than anything we’ve seen so far. Gazans counted on the world to stop this invasion, and the world let them down.

Residents of Rafah have long been in a state of panic in anticipation of this eventuality. That panic intensified Monday morning, when the Israeli army dropped leaflets from the sky ordering those living in Rafah’s eastern districts to immediately flee to the ill-equipped coastal area of Al-Mawasi.

Within hours, tens of thousands packed up what remains of their lives — many of them for the third, fourth, or fifth time since October — and headed northwest to what Israel is calling an “expanded safe zone.” But if Palestinians have learned anything from the past seven months, it is that nowhere in Gaza is ever safe from Israel’s onslaught.

“Since the first day of displacement, I have been living in fear,” 48-year-old Reem Al-Barbari told +972. “I was displaced from Gaza City five months ago and took refuge in Rafah straight away, as the army told us it was a ‘safe area.’ But on Monday morning, leaflets fell instructing us to evacuate, and there was intense bombing throughout the night into Tuesday.

“The sky turned red from the intensity of the explosions,” Al-

Barbari continued. “We were unable to sleep at all as we waited for the morning hours to uproot our lives again. The streets were very crowded with citizens — everyone was fleeing.”

Al-Barbari had hoped that when the time finally came to leave Rafah, it would be to return to her home in the Zaytoun neighborhood of Gaza City. “I left crying,” she said. “We went to look for somewhere to stay around Al-Mawasi, where I have no relatives or friends. We were hosted temporarily by other families displaced from Gaza City until we found a tent for ourselves.

“The situation is very painful,” Al-Barbari added. “Our feelings cannot be expressed in words. We are living through a cruel injustice, and the war is only intensifying. We, the citizens, are its victims.”

Despite warnings from humanitarian organizations, U.S. President Joe Biden’s claim that a Rafah invasion would be a “red line,” and Hamas’ acceptance of the latest Egyptian-Qatari ceasefire proposal — triggering fleeting celebrations among Palestinians across Gaza — the Israeli army pressed ahead with its incursion amid a blaze of fire near the Egyptian border. Since then, artillery and bombings have continued relentlessly.

For now, the operation is focused on the city’s eastern area and the Rafah Crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt — the only route to the outside world for the severely wounded, the extremely sick, and those lucky enough to be able to pay for their escape. The nearby Karem Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom Crossing was also closed for several days, sealing off access to essential humanitarian aid for the residents of the south; on Wednesday morning, Israel reportedly reopened it.

Maryam Al-Sufi, 40, is from Al-Shoka, one of Rafah’s eastern neighborhoods, from which Israel ordered residents to flee. “I was on

my way to buy some vegetables from the market, and I heard many people saying that the army dropped leaflets on Al-Shoka and its surrounding areas,” she told +972. “I ran home to confirm the news, and found neighbors out in the street talking about this.

“I was very confused and did not know how to make the decision to leave my home,” Al-Sufi continued. “My husband and his brothers decided it was necessary for the safety of our children; there were scenes of children being bombed in their homes. But I loved all the things in my house. I started collecting the items we would need and a lot of my children’s clothes. It felt like I was leaving this house forever.”

Al-Sufi and her family packed up their belongings and went to stay with relatives who own a cafe on the coast. “The street was crowded with cars and trucks transporting displaced people,” she recalled. “As we fled, we saw bombs falling in the eastern areas of the city.

“We are forced to cry,” she continued. “No one can protect us from the bombing. We used to say that Rafah is safe — we took in our friends and relatives [who fled from other parts of Gaza]. But the army attacked all areas and did not spare anyone.

“We are displaced out of fear for our children,” Al-Sufi added. “We saw what happened in Gaza City and Khan Younis. We hope that Rafah will not be destroyed and that we will not lose anyone.”

Approximately 100,000 Palestinians were living in the area that Israel ordered to evacuate on Monday. But many more have fled the city since then, fearing that Israel’s invasion will quickly expand beyond its current boundaries and endanger the lives of the entire population.

“We live in a state of acute anxiety,” Ahmed Masoud, a human rights activist at Gaza’s Social Development Forum, explained, warning of the catastrophe that a large-scale incursion would entail. “Most of

the displaced people in tents are children, women, and the elderly,” he said, adding that the population has already been weakened by months of exhaustion, hunger, disease, and exposure to the winter cold then summer heat.

Reda Auf, a 35-year-old vendor, told +972 that an atmosphere of panic has taken hold throughout the city since Monday. “People here are afraid,” he said. “They are walking with their bags on their shoulders and their children beside them. Women are crying from the oppression of displacement. They have no confidence in [the mercy of] the army because it does not spare anyone. Dozens of massacres have occurred over the past two days through continuous bombing — not only in the areas that were evacuated to the east of the city, but also in the center and west.

“People are moving their belongings and looking for somewhere to take refuge, but there is no safe place,” Auf continued. “All openings to the outside world have been closed in our faces and no one feels our plight. I will also be looking for a tent for myself around Al-Mawasi, because the army will extend [its invasion] to the west of the city if it does not find anyone to stop this bloody operation.”

“The prospect of evacuation from Rafah fills me with dread,” Abd al-Rahman Abu Marq, who has endured displacement three times since October, shared. “My heart quivers at the sight of leaflets being dropped. I don’t know where we would go or how we would get there. I have a mother who cannot walk long distances, and I am responsible for my sisters.

“I’m trying to formulate contingency plans in case evacuation becomes necessary, but the thought of it fills me with terror,” he went on. “For me, sudden death seems preferable to the agonizing

anticipation of what lies ahead.”

“We find ourselves ensnared in an unending nightmare as they breach our borders, seemingly sanctioned by the green light from America,” Abu Salem, a 55-year-old living in a tent in the Tal el-Sultan neighborhood, told +972. “Across all regions of Gaza, the cycle of ground invasions persists, accompanied by atrocities against civilians. Yet the world remains eerily silent, as if oblivious to our plight.”

The shutting of the border crossings, as well as the forced closure of Rafah’s main medical facility, Al-Najjar Hospital, promises to exacerbate an already dire humanitarian situation for those who remain in the city. Hundreds of thousands are living in makeshift tents that are often unable to fulfill the most basic functions of a shelter, and are ill-equipped to house people for months on end. The quest for basic food supplies long ago became a daily struggle, and the spread of disease is increasingly rampant.

Severe overcrowding and a scarcity of goods have made it virtually impossible for the limited number of vendors and distributors to meet the tremendous needs of the population. Residents are forced to queue in front of stores, often reserving their places before sunrise to ensure they can access the available goods before they run out.

Among those struggling is Hisham Yousef Abu Ghaniama, a displaced father of six, who is staying in the southern district of Tel al-Sultan. With no other means of transportation available, Abu Ghaniama is forced to walk to Rafah’s city center every day — a journey of an hour and a half each way. “We are living in an endless tragedy,” he said. “I am 34 years old, and my hair has become gray from the worries and pains that we face.”

The Abu Ghaniama family, originally from Shuja’iya, east of Gaza

City, has endured a harrowing journey since the beginning of the war. Forced to flee their home, they initially sought shelter in UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) schools in the north before being displaced once again to Khan Younis. Their plight took another devastating turn when they were suddenly attacked by the Israeli army in Khan Younis and forced to flee, leaving behind their clothes and personal belongings.

“I don’t understand what is happening to us. The situation has exceeded the limits of logic and reason,” Abu Ghaniama said. “Before the war, I used to ask my children what they liked to eat, but now we are searching for any available food to stay alive. You want to bury yourself when your daughter cries and asks you for candy. How can I make her understand the situation we are living in? For seven months we have been killed and our bodies have shrunk to half their size. After how long will this lead to our death?”

Describing the unforgiving conditions, he speaks of mornings engulfed in suffocating heat and evenings shrouded in bone-chilling cold. “Living in a tent in Tel al-Sultan means suffocating,” he said, with “no clean air available” due to the acrid scent of smoke and the stench of garbage. “Even the most simple things are complicated: taking a nap, sitting quietly with your mother, taking a shower, feeling safe, and not suffering from back pain or exhaustion due to sleeping on the floor.”

According to Ahmed Mamoun, who was displaced from Al-Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza when it came under Israeli bombardment, perhaps the most disturbing thing is the increasing normalization of suffering, as desperation drives people to vie for what now count as personal triumphs. “Tents have become a luxury,” Mamoun said. “If there’s a meter between you and your neighbor, people envy you and say you have a ventilation shaft.”

Yet the prospect of securing a more durable shelter is vanishingly small due to the compounding challenges of the war. Mamoun was forced to make a small tent for his family of seven out of wood and plastic — which cost around \$570 to buy. “The price of the equipment I purchased is many times its original price before the Israeli war, due to the scarcity of raw materials at the moment,” he explained.

Food and adequate shelter are not the only necessities in short supply in Rafah; so too are medical facilities, and all the more so in the wake of Israel’s intensified assault. Over the past three weeks, Mahmoud Gohar Al-Balaawi, 62, has traversed the distance from Tel al-Sultan camp to the nearest clinic — a three-hour journey he must make by foot — in order to secure vital medications for managing his high blood pressure and diabetes.

“I am an elderly man; I find myself drained of energy, unsure whether to prioritize my own health, concern for my sons who are besieged in the north, or navigating our displacement in Rafah,” he lamented. “Here, everyone seems preoccupied with their own survival. It’s an endless cycle of anguish. I’m depleted in mind and body.”

Disease is also on the rise — a product of severe overcrowding and the lack of hygiene, running water, and adequate healthcare. Two of the most prevalent diseases are cholera and hepatitis, both of which are spread through contaminated water.

“For us, life here lacks even the most basic necessities,” Fatima Ashour, a mother of three, told +972. “There are no clean bathrooms and no sanitation. Garbage piles up on the ground, and children play in it, unaware of the danger. Every day, I comb through my daughter’s hair, battling the relentless onslaught of lice. You can’t take a single step without brushing up on someone else. We’re packed in like sardines,

with no respite in sight.”

Two weeks ago, Ashour’s 6-year-old son Zaid began looking emaciated, and his eyes became yellow with jaundice — an indication of his ailing liver and a telltale sign of hepatitis. He is now largely immobile, and he lay listless in his mother’s arms, his eyes dulled by the weight of illness.

Booking an appointment at one of the city’s few overcrowded hospitals is extremely difficult, and even once an appointment is secured, there may not be the necessary medication or even any doctors available. In the meantime, with no space for isolation, caring for Zaid risks the health of his entire family. “The camp is a breeding ground for sickness,” Ashour said, her voice heavy. “With no access to clean water or proper sanitation, we’re all at risk.”

The living conditions are such that some of the displaced wonder if they should have fled their homes at all. “I would have preferred to face the peril of Israeli tanks in the north than endure the relentless torment of this mental anguish,” 26-year-old Ahmed Hany Dremly told +972.

Indeed, the sight of massive new refugee camps all over southern Gaza evokes poignant memories for Palestinians, harking back to the experiences of their ancestors during the Nakba.

“We are living in a new catastrophe, a new displacement, where the details almost mirror those of 76 years ago,” said 72-year-old Umm Ali Handouqa, whose family was expelled from Majdal (what is now the Israeli city of Ashkelon) to the Gaza Strip in 1948.

Handouqa recalled her childhood memories of Al-Shati refugee camp, reminiscing about the hardships and tough conditions they endured. The tents gradually transformed into small concrete houses as the temporary became a more permanent reality — and Handouqa

fears a similar fate could befall Gaza's new camps.

"The echoes of the stories my mother told me about the Nakba resonate in my ears," Handouqa reflected. "The same scenes and details are repeating themselves, the same oppressor and the same victims, the same killers and the same slain.

"We fled from the north out of fear of Israeli forces entering our homes, killing our children before our eyes, and the fear of women being raped," she said. "It's the same reason my father fled from Majdal to Gaza."

MAY 21, 2024:
CEMENTING ITS MILITARY FOOTPRINT,
ISRAEL IS TRANSFORMING GAZA'S GEOGRAPHY

More than seven months into the war, the Israeli military's long-term plans for the Gaza Strip are becoming clearer. From satellite imagery and eyewitness testimonies, it appears that the army is destroying homes, bulldozing land, and erecting structures that will enable it to operate within Gaza for years to come.

Since the start of the war, the military has demolished buildings along the eastern edge of the Gaza Strip, part of what is widely believed to be a plan to establish a kilometer-wide "buffer zone" between populated areas in Gaza and Israel — the equivalent of 16 percent of Gaza's territory — which Palestinians would be banned from entering. Doing so would permanently displace thousands of civilians and severely impact Gaza's already-limited agricultural sector.

Yet this buffer zone is not the only way the Israeli military may permanently transform Gaza's geography. Since October, the abandoned Netzarim checkpoint — which the Israeli military operated prior to its "disengagement" from Gaza in 2005 — has been expanded into a 6.5-kilometer-long road bisecting the strip. Satellite images now show the "Netzarim Corridor" stretching from Gaza's eastern boundary with Israel all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, as well as extensive construction of housing units, communications towers, and other infrastructure. By building outposts along the Netzarim Corridor, the army will be able to control and restrict movement across Gaza and continue to carry out ground operations.

Such rampant destruction of private property and occupation of

territory outside Israel's recognized borders is a flagrant violation of international law, with immediate consequences for Gaza's civilian population. In addition to the loss of their lands and homes, Palestinians who were displaced by the war to the south of the Strip are now physically blocked from even returning to the north.

Tasnim Ahal, a 21-year-old student from Gaza City, was displaced to Rafah in late March. "My father initially refused to leave Gaza City and move to the south, so we lived for nearly six months moving from one area in Gaza City to another," she told +972. She and her sister ultimately decided to flee to Rafah, with the hope of staying alive to complete their academic programs and pursue a better future.

They tried to leave at a strategic moment. "The last time Al-Shifa Hospital was raided during the month of Ramadan, I said goodbye to my family, and my sister Sama and I went to walk to the south. I told my family that the army was busy storming Al-Shifa Hospital, so we wouldn't run into tanks on our way. But we were wrong."

Tasnim quickly encountered what she described as a "complete military base" at Netzarim, with Israeli tanks roaming through the area. "I saw soldiers in civilian clothing, walking around by the sea. It was clear that they were residing there and had built a base for themselves." Sama, Tasnim's 19-year-old sister, noted "dozens of soldiers in the area," equipped with facial surveillance devices, "as if the area was completely occupied."

Tasnim and Sama described being followed by a tank until they reached a group of Israeli soldiers. "The soldiers allowed us to pass ... but they unleashed dogs on us, and we did not look back. We saw Gaza City for the last time as a pile of ashes and said goodbye, in the hope that we would return to it soon."

As the Israeli military widens the buffer zone separating Gaza from Israel, Palestinians are witnessing the destruction of their homes and villages. Khaled Taima is from the town of Khuza'a, which lies east of Khan Younis — and now within the expanded buffer zone. While Taima has not yet seen any construction activity, he noted to +972 that “the army blew up many of the buildings in Khuza'a and bulldozed a lot of land there as well,” razing entire residential blocks. Taima has repeatedly tried to return to Khuza'a, but each time, “the tanks fired at us and prevented us from reaching the area.”

This destruction appears to be consistent along Gaza's entire eastern perimeter. Rami Obaid, a resident of the town of Beit Hanoun, in the northeast corner of the Strip, told +972 that he was worried about “the effects of the extensive bulldozing and destruction” in areas near the border fence, especially for those who had lost their homes and lands as a result of the widened buffer zone. “We will not return to our homes if the army carries out its plan,” he lamented.

Before October 7, Israel had long maintained a 300-meter buffer zone carved out of Gaza's territory, and routinely shot and killed Palestinians who entered the area. Only a small number of farmers with approval from the military were allowed into the zone.

This was also the site of the 2018 Great March of Return, where Palestinians gathered every Friday for over a year to call for an end to Israel's blockade on Gaza and the implementation of their right of return. Protesters were met with fierce violence: over the course of 18 months, Israeli snipers killed 223 Palestinians and injured over 8,000 with live ammunition, including medics and journalists.

Now, Israeli officials claim that massively expanding the buffer zone is necessary for Israelis to return to the towns surrounding the Gaza

Strip, which were evacuated after the Hamas-led attacks on October 7. But it also seems to be a strategic move by Israel to strengthen its hand in future negotiations, according to Reham Owda, a political analyst in Gaza.

“On the day after the war, the international community will want to return to negotiating a two-state solution, and if the PA takes over Gaza, it will have to negotiate with Israel for its military to evacuate the buffer zone,” Owda explained. “These areas will have the same fate as those taken by Israel in the West Bank: the Palestinians will have to negotiate in order to get them back.”

Owda believes that the Israeli buffer zone may extend the entire length of Gaza, including the eastern area of the city of Rafah, where the military launched its incursion at the beginning of May. Sami Zoroub, a 32-year-old from the Al-Shu'ara neighborhood of Rafah, is one of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who were displaced as Israeli tanks moved into the city. While the Israeli army issued evacuation notices to the residents of Al-Shu'ara, Zoroub and his family initially remained in their home, reassured by “the statements from American officials that said that the operation was limited to the east of the city.” Yet continuous bombing in eastern Rafah kept them up at night, and they soon moved to a relative's home in the city center, only to be followed by approaching tanks.

“Now we have moved to the west of Rafah, to the Al-Mawasi area,” Zoroub told +972. “We did not expect the army to penetrate the city of Rafah by land, in spite of the warnings of countries around the world.”

Throughout Gaza, the Israeli military's destruction of homes and seizure of land is an ominous sign for the future of the Strip. Obaid's wife, who was displaced to a camp in Deir Al-Balah, told him that

“watchtowers and cameras were deployed all along the [coastal] road, and ... quadcopters and reconnaissance planes are monitoring the area and preventing citizens from returning to the north.” As Israel expands and cements this military architecture, Obaid observed, “it’s as if Gaza is entirely under their control.”

JUNE 5, 2024:
‘WE’RE ALL AT RISK OF BEING TARGETED’:
DOCTORS EVACUATE RAFAH’S LAST HOSPITALS

On May 30, the World Health Organization announced that Rafah’s last remaining hospital, the Al-Helal al-Emirati Hospital, had gone out of service. The destruction of the southern Gaza city’s health care system, which comes after more than two dozen hospitals across the Strip have completely shut down as a result of Israel’s assault, encapsulates the human toll of the intensifying Israeli military operation in Rafah.

Far from the “limited” invasion that Israel’s leaders proclaimed, Israeli forces are currently occupying the heart of the city and remain in control of the Rafah Crossing and Philadelphi Corridor, while airstrikes continue to pummel camps for displaced families. Since Israel’s incursion began on May 6, more than 1 million Palestinians have fled Gaza’s last refuge.

In addition to the Emirati Hospital, the Abu Yousef al-Najjar Hospital and the Kuwaiti Hospital have been forced to cease all functions in recent weeks. With several smaller clinics closing too, all that remains to serve Rafah’s sick and wounded is two small field hospitals in the coastal area of Al-Mawasi — one run by the United Arab Emirates, and the other by the International Medical Corps — which are ill-equipped to deal with the scale of suffering among those unable or unwilling to flee the city.

With Israel’s ground invasion continuing to advance toward western Rafah, these remaining clinics may also soon be forced to evacuate. And while a trickle of seriously wounded patients had been leaving Gaza via the Rafah Crossing for treatment abroad, nobody has been

able to escape the Strip since Israel occupied the crossing.

Muhammad Zaqout, the Gaza Health Ministry's director general of hospitals, told +972 that staff at Rafah's hospitals evacuated "because they feared a repeat of what happened at Nasser Medical Complex and Al-Shifa Hospital." Israeli forces besieged and raided both hospitals in recent months, in Khan Younis and Gaza City respectively; after their withdrawal, mass graves containing hundreds of bodies were found at both sites.

"Hospitals in Tel al-Sultan [western Rafah] are being bombed by missiles and Quadcopter drones," Zaqout explained. "The Indonesian field hospital was damaged, and the doctors there were terrified." According to Gaza's Health Ministry, nearly 500 healthcare workers have been killed as a result of Israel's attacks across the Strip since October.

The field clinics that remain open, Zaqout added, "do not have advanced equipment to receive patients with serious injuries," who must instead be transferred to the European Hospital near Khan Younis. This journey, he said, "requires an ambulance for an hour or more due to the long distance, the presence of [Israeli] tanks, and the continuous bombing of the city."

Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, Zaqout noted, is slowly starting to receive new patients again after having been forced to shut down during Israel's raids on the complex. But it, too, is able to admit only a small number of the wounded who are transported from Rafah.

According to Zaqout, the situation is similarly desperate in northern Gaza amid continuing Israeli military operations: with Al-Shifa and Kamal Adwan Hospital both out of commission, Al-Ahli Hospital is the only major medical facility offering some services.

Dr. Rima Sadiq, 29, worked at the Kuwaiti Hospital until it was forced to close on May 28. “We received a large number of casualties during the first days of the military operation,” she said. “The bombing never stops. With every [attack], we received at least 10 [patients with] injuries of varying severity. All injuries require treatment and follow-up, and the presence of a hospital near [the wounded] saves lives.”

Sadiq explained that the staff were eager to continue working to serve the city’s residents but they ultimately had no choice but to abandon the hospital. As Israel’s bombardment intensified, staff feared for their own lives and the lives of their patients, as well as the potential damage to medical devices and equipment.

“The situation has become very dangerous,” she said. “Two paramedics were martyred during their work to transport the wounded. The Israeli army does not exclude medical personnel from its [attacks]. We are all at risk of being targeted or arrested.”

“There are patients who were forced to leave the hospital in poor condition who require follow-up,” Sadiq continued. “Field hospitals are unable to receive large numbers [of patients] due to their clinical capacity and lack of treatments.” The lack of food, she added, only worsens their conditions and prevents a full recovery.

Yet just as the ability of Rafah’s health services to treat the wounded declines, the need is becoming ever greater. As Israel’s ground assault intensifies, so have the army’s attacks on Palestinians who remain in the city — including in areas it had designated as “safe zones” such as Al-Mawasi and Tel al-Sultan.

Around 45 Palestinians were killed in a single attack on a refugee camp on the night of May 26, when much of the encampment was engulfed in flames and many burned to death inside their tents.

Another attack two days later on tents in Al-Mawasi killed 21.

Marwa Asraf, 38, witnessed the attack on Al-Mawasi. Originally from Beit Hanoun in the north, Asraf was displaced to Al-Mawasi with six of her family members. “What we are experiencing in this area is terrifying,” she told +972. “We do not feel safe at all. Shells and missiles are falling continuously.”

At the time of the Al-Mawasi bombing, Asraf had gone to search for water for their family. “I left my children with their father and grandmother,” she recounted. “Suddenly, I heard the sound of an explosion and then the screams of the displaced people. I fell to the ground from the intensity of the sound. I was crying. I thought that my children had been bombed.

“I started running mindlessly, and left the water jug on the ground,” Asraf continued. “I returned to the tent and found my children crying. Their grandmother was crying, too; she told me that my husband Ahmed ran toward the tents to check on the wounded, and that she was very concerned for him. I did not believe that my children were okay. One displaced person staying near us was killed when shrapnel entered the tent.

“This situation is very tiring,” she went on. “We are tired of being displaced from the northern Gaza Strip, for eight months, and we are waiting to return to our homes. We were a little reassured because we were in a ‘safe area,’ but whoever says that is a liar. We lost more than seventy people, including women and children, while they were in their tents.”

Beyond its emotional cost, Asraf explained, constantly relocating with her family has taken a financial toll. “We need to hire a taxi to take us to a new place every time we have to move. We spent all our

money during this war just to buy basic necessities. Now I very much regret [leaving] the north. I wish I had stayed there and died in my home instead of here in the area they said was safe.”

Riyad Rawida, 43, was also displaced to Al-Mawasi from his home in the center of Rafah. He fled with 20 of his relatives after they spotted Israeli tanks penetrating the Zoroub roundabout area, approaching Tel al-Sultan. “We began to hear shelling and clashes,” he recalled. “We saw people leaving their homes and fleeing to Al-Mawasi. Tel al-Sultan became almost empty. We had no choice.”

Unlike the vast majority of Gaza’s displaced residents, this was the first time Rawida and his family had been forced to flee their homes. “It was difficult for us — we were in our homes from the beginning of the war for more than seven and a half months. Many [Israeli] statements reassured us that the area was safe, and that the world rejected any Israeli military operation in Rafah. But the army broke those lines and attacked the city, gradually advancing toward the western areas.

“Now we are in Al-Mawasi and we are afraid of being targeted at any moment, as happened in the tents last week,” he continued. “There is no safety at all. I fear for my children. The tents do not protect anyone. In Tel al-Sultan, we saw the tents catching fire and children burning inside them. The situation in Rafah is dangerous, the streets are empty, and unfortunately life has stopped here.”

SEPTEMBER 12, 2024:
**‘PEOPLE TORN TO PIECES’ IN ISRAELI
AIRSTRIKE ON GAZA DISPLACEMENT CAMP**

In the early hours of Tuesday morning, Israeli missiles rained down on a designated “humanitarian zone” in the coastal area of Al-Mawasi, west of Khan Younis. For months, hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians have taken shelter there upon Israel’s orders to evacuate from almost everywhere else in the Gaza Strip. But even in this supposed sanctuary, safety for Palestinians is an illusion, and the displaced remain as vulnerable as ever.

For three harrowing hours, search-and-rescue teams, illuminated only by the dim glow of flashlights and the occasional flare of burning wreckage, sifted through the sand, desperate to find survivors. Instead, they unearthed the bodies of men, women, and children who were torn apart and buried under the very earth on which they had sought refuge. Tents were set ablaze, and the bombs left deep craters in the earth.

According to Gaza’s Health Ministry, the airstrikes killed at least 19 people and wounded dozens more. It was Israel’s fifth attack on the area since designating it a place of refuge, and Tuesday’s bombings brought the total death toll from these attacks to more than 150.

The Israeli military claimed that it had “struck significant Hamas terrorists who were operating within a command and control centre embedded inside the humanitarian area.” Hamas denied the allegation.

One of the martyrs, Ahmed Al-Qadi, was only 3 years old. He had been living in Al-Mawasi with his mother and two siblings since early July, when Israeli forces invaded their neighborhood in Gaza City and arrested Ahmed’s father. On the night of the bombings, Ahmed’s

mother, Fatima, was jolted awake by the sound of explosions.

“I woke up to a noise so loud that I thought it was the end of the world,” she told +972, her voice trembling. “When I looked around, my children were gone. I was surrounded by darkness, smoke, and screaming. I couldn’t see or breathe.”

Rescue workers found Ahmed hours later, buried under a mound of sand. His small body lay still, his face frozen in terror.

His two siblings, aged 6 and 8, survived the attack, but with severe injuries. “I found them covered in blood, their legs crushed,” Fatima recounted, tears streaming down her face. “Their upper bodies were above the sand, but their legs were trapped beneath it. I don’t know how we will ever recover from this.”

The Israeli army began directing Palestinians to Al-Mawasi in the first months of its bombardment of the Strip. Home to only 6,000 people before the war, it quickly swelled into a mass displacement camp accommodating hundreds of thousands in makeshift tents. Israel’s invasion of Rafah in May triggered a further influx of refugees to the coastal area.

Israa Al-Attar, 60, came to Al-Mawasi after her home in the Shujaiya neighborhood of Gaza City, where she worked as a falafel seller, was destroyed. “I worked to raise my eight children so that they could obtain university degrees,” she told +972. “I built an eight-story building for them, so they could have separate apartments after they got married and had children.”

But in the first weeks of the war, the Israeli army decimated their home with a single airstrike. “The stones that the house was built from could describe the suffering I lived throughout my life,” she said.

Al-Attar was asleep next to her grandchildren when the intensity of

several explosions on Tuesday morning woke her up. “We were close to it,” she recounted. “Stones and dust were scattered on us. Many people were injured from the falling shrapnel. Everyone was screaming and running and asking for help.”

Umm Tareq Al-Tawil, 44, also witnessed the massacre. She has been living in Al-Mawasi for the past five months after escaping Israel’s bombings in the Nasser neighborhood of Gaza City.

“The assault was brutal,” she told +972. “We heard five explosions that felt like an earthquake shaking the entire area. It was pitch black, and we were all asleep when the bombs fell. The children ran out, crying and terrified. People were torn to pieces, most of them women and children.”

“I rushed out of the tent with my husband and children, screaming, not knowing what was happening or where to go,” Al-Tawil continued. “Out of sheer terror and fear, I ran without even covering my hair, completely frightened and disoriented.

“We believed we were safe here, and there were no resistance fighters among us,” she affirmed. “I’ve been here for five months and haven’t seen any fighters in this area. Everyone here is either a woman, child, elderly person, or just ordinary people.”

Israel’s previous bombardment of Al-Mawasi, on July 13, was even deadlier: that attack killed 90 Palestinians, with Israel claiming it had targeted Hamas military commander Mohammed Deif. The extent of the destruction on Tuesday suggests that, like in that attack, the Israeli military dropped 2,000-pound bombs on the densely-packed tent camp.

For survivors, the latest massacre in Al-Mawasi has only reaffirmed their conviction that Israel is not actually fighting Hamas, but rather

using that as an excuse to target Palestinian civilians and erase entire families from the civil registry. “Israel is pursuing us to this area in order to kill us and bury us in the ground,” Al-Attar said. “This is a war of extermination.”

A desperate search for survivors

The emergency response to Tuesday’s attack was hindered by a lack of equipment and infrastructure — the result of nearly a year of war in Gaza and a decade and a half-long siege.

Mohammed Badr, 30, who works in the Civil Defense, arrived in Al-Mawasi at 1 a.m. after receiving news of the massacre. The scene when he got there was like something out of a horror film. “There were body parts everywhere,” he recounted. “It was clear that entire families had been killed. A fire broke out in about 20 tents and there was a crater nine meters deep.”

In the darkness, Badr’s team struggled to search for survivors. “There was no lighting, so residents lit up the place with their phones,” he said. “The situation was difficult and everyone was crying, screaming, and checking on their family and relatives. We did not stop searching until daybreak.”

Ahmed, a 24-year-old volunteer paramedic (who preferred not to give his full name for fear of being targeted), was among the first responders to arrive at the scene, having been stationed nearby. “As soon as I arrived, I saw limbs scattered everywhere,” he recalled, his voice hoarse from exhaustion. “I’ve seen a lot of terrible things, but this... this was pure horror.”

Ahmed and his team worked tirelessly, pulling bodies from the sand and hoping to find someone still alive. “We found a little girl, maybe 5

or 6 years old, buried up to her neck. She was still breathing, but barely. We managed to get her out, but she died on the way to the hospital. I keep thinking about her, about all the children we couldn't save. I wonder if I could have done more."

Badr echoed this sentiment. "This relentless targeting exhausts the Civil Defense because we have no capabilities to save people," he lamented. "We stand helpless in the face of these massacres."

OCTOBER 5, 2024:
AFTER A YEAR OF TERROR IN GAZA, OUR SOULS FEEL
SUSPENDED IN TIME

It is a terrible thing to witness the obliteration of your homeland. When I think about what we've lived through this past year, I feel like I'm going to lose my mind completely. It is a shock that I'm still unable to absorb. I try not to think at all, in the hope of maintaining my sanity until it ends.

Seconds go by like hours. One night of this torment is difficult enough; our souls feel suspended in time, until morning comes and we have to endure another day. We search for one piece of news that might change our lives for the better. I long for the day when we no longer hear the constant noise of bombs, warplanes, and drones. The day the death stops.

At the beginning, I was hopeful that the war would end within a week or two, like in the past. It won't last more than a month, I would assure people; if we can just make it until then, we'll be okay. I don't know why I was so certain. Perhaps I believed that the world would step in to stop this madness. Twelve months later, we feel as though the world has simply accepted our suffering as if it is the natural state of affairs.

In an instant, my life was filled with terror. The school at which I used to teach has been destroyed. Several of my students and colleagues have been killed, martyred before I even had the chance to say goodbye. One colleague's heart simply gave out, unable to bear all of this. I lost contact with many of my friends.

No longer able to do the job I love, I began channeling all of my

remaining energy into writing, trying to give voice to the experience of Gazans under Israel's brutal onslaught. But I am not an outsider: I face all of the same challenges that I report on — from forced displacement to a lack of food, water, and electricity, and the absence of healthcare.

For the first eight months of the war, until we managed to buy a solar panel, my father would walk from our home in the Al-Fukhari neighborhood, between Khan Younis and Rafah, to the European Hospital in order to charge our phones, batteries, and other devices. The lack of food and water has remained a difficult and expensive problem: I never expected to have to pay \$70 for a week's supply of water, or to carry heavy containers with my family just to fill our tanks.

For my mother, who suffers from a bone and nerve disease, this year was spent in constant pain. She cannot move without her medications, which we search for in every hospital and pharmacy. When we do find them, we buy as much as we can. But often we don't, so she has reduced her intake to make the medication last longer. We hear her groans, yet we're helpless to alleviate her suffering.

Every time we leave our house, we recognize the possibility that any one of us could return in a shroud. We know that Israel's incessant bombing means there is no safe place in Gaza — even inside our home. But we thank God every moment that our house is still standing and able to offer a partial sense of comfort.

My sister was not so lucky. In December, her house in Khan Younis refugee camp was badly damaged during Israel's ground invasion, and she came to live with us. I tried to console her but she was devastated by the loss of her home, robbed of the future she was planning to build in it.

I will never forget the evening I narrowly escaped death. It was Aug.

16, and I was alone on the second floor of my family's house. My mother, father, and sister were downstairs, and my brother was playing in the street with his friends.

I heard the sound of the missile as it descended, and braced for the explosion so I would know where to run. But I didn't expect it to land so close — only a few meters away from our house. Suddenly, dust, rocks, and shards of glass were flying everywhere. I screamed for someone to save me. I still don't know how I was able to get down to the first floor; the thick smoke prevented me from seeing anything around me. But when I made it outside, I grasped the extent of the damage.

Our neighbors' house had been completely destroyed. The surrounding houses were badly damaged — including my uncle's house, which was half destroyed. Our house was damaged too: shrapnel sliced a large hole in our roof, all the windows were shattered, and the water tank was in ruins. We were lucky to make it out alive, but I still suffer from bruises on my back.

For me, home is life. And all things considered, it is a miracle that we are still living in ours. But we were twice forced to abandon it as Israel's attacks closed in, and each time we didn't know if we would have a home to return to. It brought back awful memories from the year 2000, when I was 8 years old, and the Israeli army bulldozed our home to the ground; I was terrified that we would have to live through this painful loss again.

Our first displacement was during the early weeks of the war, when our area came under heavy shelling. We spent a cold night in the parking lot of the European Hospital; the corridors inside were already too crowded to accommodate us. I didn't sleep a single moment. I felt as though there was a huge rock on my chest, weighing me down.

Then, on the morning of July 2, we fled again after the Israeli army issued evacuation orders for our neighborhood. We gathered our belongings into a truck and headed to my sister's damaged house, which we tried to fix up as best we could. But I couldn't bear the agony of being displaced from my own home, and so, despite the danger, I returned after 10 days with my father and brother, and my mother joined us soon after.

When we arrived back home, our neighborhood was nearly empty. Many of our neighbors had fled to Al-Mawasi, the so-called "humanitarian zone," and wouldn't return until around two months later. On several occasions, with the incursion of Israeli forces into the city, we were besieged in our immediate surroundings for a week or more, unable to move freely without risking being shot.

Back in the spring, my mother and I made the decision to leave Gaza. At first, she was reluctant to travel, worried about leaving behind my sister and her two children. But with the lack of treatment for her condition, she agreed that it would be for the best.

Our escape plan was in motion. We managed to register with a travel agency to leave through the Rafah Crossing, our bags were packed, and we were merely waiting for our names to appear on the exit list. On the night of May 6, our time finally arrived. Then the unimaginable happened: the following morning, as we awaited confirmation that we could leave the next day, the Israeli army invaded Rafah. The first thing it did was occupy the Rafah Crossing, cutting off our last passageway to the outside world.

Every day, we wait for the crossing to reopen so that we will be allowed to leave. We dream of that moment. But each day that I remain stuck here, I lose a little more hope for the future of Gaza.

"I cannot sleep, not even for one minute. I am constantly haunted by the voices and screams of people under the rubble as they beg us to pull them out."

Ibrahim Musa, rescue worker from Al-Bureij refugee camp

"I live in a tent now. I am a mother of five children: they crave food and they are all sick, but we have no medicine and I cannot help them."

Sanaa Barbakh, displaced from Khan Younis refugee camp

"If I die, remember that I, we, were individuals, humans, we had names, dreams and achievements and our only fault was that we were classified as inferior."

Belal Aldabbour

"There is no lonelier place in this universe than around the bed of a wounded child who has no more family to look after them."

Ghassan Abu Sitta

