

GAZA UNDER FIRE:
PEOPLE KILLED, LIFE SHATTERED, LAND OCCUPIED
by
The Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC)

The impact of the Israeli assault on Gaza: people and infrastructure

On midday Saturday Dec. 27th 2008 the Israeli air force launched an attack on several places in the Gaza Strip with a concentration on places in Gaza city. Then, from day one, the Israeli army moved into the green fields, avoiding all main asphalt roads. They established military bases on those agricultural lands. They built on those green fields new roads for their military use. This is mainly in the eastern part of Gaza city, and Beit Lahia and Jabalia villages to the north of Gaza city. In practical terms, they have widened the buffer security zone from 50-100 meter to become 3000 meters, and in some areas it is wider than that; with the military zone yet wider than that. After they established themselves, under the cover of unmanned surveillance planes, choppers and fighter-bomber F16s, they launched a massive ground offensive on land using heavy tanks, armored vehicles, jeeps, artillery, and warships! They inflicted huge damages on residential buildings and thousands of civilians fall between dead, injured, traumatized, shocked, distressed, and turned homeless.

For twenty two days and nights so far, no one night witnessed any changes of the previous night or day with air activities of surveillance and bombing by helicopters and fighter-bomber F16s and war vessels. They left no stone unturned as they targeted homes of civilians, playgrounds, and public gardens! For example, in al-Nasser neighborhood, last night [17 January 2009], at least 9 homes were hit by F16s! All of it was apartments in high-rise residential buildings On Wednesday, January 14, F16 missiles landed in the Sheikh Radwan graveyard destroying 17 tombs and bringing up its dead bodies! This has put forward a question of where else they will hit, and this also makes one wonder what other places the Israeli army commanders have in mind to destroy! Gaza medical authorities announced a death toll of 1,300, including 418 child and 118 woman, 118 elderly, plus 5,500 injured. Let alone those traumatized, and panicked by the Israeli invasion. Let alone those who have not been saved or rescued and died under rubble or in the green fields! Medical doctors mentioned that hundreds of the injured will never recover and return to normal life! Hundreds will live as physically handicapped. Media and satellite channels reported from Shifa hospital, screening a video of a 15 years old girl with her legs mutilated from above her knees; another one with one leg remaining; a boy lost his eyes, and others more... The health situation is deteriorating with the limited capacities of surgery operation rooms and poor available facilities. Some 60-70 doctors from the Arab countries and some European

ones, in support of the Palestinian surgeons, is a help but it is still some of the injured cannot be treated in Gaza, no matter what. ... Also, 13 paramedics lost their lives while on duty; many ambulances were shot at when they wanted to save injured and evacuate dead bodies! Its all exclamation marks when you speak about what is going on in Gaza Strip!

In week two, Israeli helicopters launched attacks with phosphorus bombs, which was a frank violation of all human rights and conventions! They cared nothing about the international community. Those bombs caused burns to injured people; many of the injured died from it! One Norwegian surgeon, named Mads Gilbert, was in Gaza for several days; he operated surgeries at Shifa hospital emergencies. He returned to his country on 12th January 2009. He said: "the number of civilians injured and killed in Gaza proves that Israel is deliberately attacking the population... The hospitals have reached maximum capacity, all the doctors are operating around the clock and there are thousands of people untreated... This is an all-out war against the civilian Palestinian population in Gaza Strip... They are bombing 1.5 million people in a cage". For following up with this witness, check his interview with Sky News: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ev6ojm62qwA&eurl=>

Also, in the second week of the invasion surgeons and other doctors from different countries have been allowed to enter into Gaza to help in the hospitals. Meantime, the Norwegian medical team (two surgeons) has left Gaza to go back to their country. There are doctors from various countries including Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Greece, and Sudan. The Sudanese team has not arrived yet - they are on their way to Gaza with bags of blood donated by the people of Sudan.

The aid crisis

Thousands of tonnes of donations in terms of food stuff, basic supplies and fuel have been coordinated to arrive to Gaza across the Rafah crossings. UNRWA stored it in the precincts of its headquarters in Gaza city; unexpectedly, all of a sudden, on January 15th the whole world was surprised and shocked when the stores were burnt during an attack by Israeli aircrafts. The whole stores were set ablaze! The whole world condemned the attack! The attacked raised the humanitarian predicament of thousands of displaced and refugee families in Gaza Strip.

To say the least, every new day brings about more deaths, more casualties, more displaced people, and more destruction both in the urban and the rural lives. Every night brings about bad dreams and nightmares for thousands of children, women and their families! Imagine that in every street in Gaza there are pathetic stories and for every family there are pathetic stories. It is all havoc, chaos, pandemonium and destruction. Moreover, there are untold stories and pathetic scenes in the hospitals and elsewhere! In Tel el-Hawa neighborhood, in a ruthless manner, the Israeli army evacuated one building of Al-Quds hospital from its patients and bombed it by tanks. About 10 ambulances were destroyed by Israeli tanks too; they destroyed three ambulances and used them as military barricades in Tel el-Hawa.

As a result of the attacks, 90,000 people have fled from their homes. They have either lost their homes (4,200 completely destroyed and 5,600 damaged) by air raids, shelling and bombing, or they escaped from immediate combat zones, or they were ordered by the Israeli army to evacuate their homes! Thousands are staying with relatives or friends in what they think are safer areas inside the cities and towns. But those who have no relatives to resort to found only one place to hide; they packed themselves in UNRWA schools. Unfortunately, three of those schools were targeted by the Israeli forces; the UNRWA school in Jabalia was bombed by three shells from a tank; 67 of the refugees died in that attack, and more than 40 were injured. A third UNRWA school was hit in Beit Lahia village; at least 10 people died and dozens injured. Therefore, at the present time, 40 UNRWA schools embrace Palestinians escaping from war. In each school, there are 120 families taken care of by UNRWA which provided them with blankets and offers them three meals a day to survive. Other relief efforts are provided by other local NGOs including the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC).

Environmental destruction and decimation of agricultural farmland

In the heat of the battle and under continuous air raids, no one pays attention to the environmental destruction. The crisis will be declared soon once military operations come to a halt. One immediate environmental concern is over the tonnes of rubbish that have accumulated on streets corners. Also, there are the health hazards from thick clouds of black smoke coming out of bombed homes. It suffocates noses and hurts chest of whoever smells it; it is reality that everyone in the area smells it. Of greater concern and worry is the negative effects of gun powder, explosives, let alone the white phosphorus bombs that inflicted damage on people, buildings and trees. Actually, it has destroyed and burnt everything it was thrown at: people, homes, hospitals, trees, and other things. Air pollution, contamination and solid waste are everywhere and there is no escape from it; nobody is safe from it.

Then, the agricultural life has turned into a total disarray with thousands of tanks and military vehicles running over the fields and the Israeli army bulldozers destroying plants and uprooting trees everywhere the army wants to operate! On the other hand, the Israeli army was so tough on the farmers in those isolated areas near the border. Have they punished whoever happens to live near the border? They are only small farmers living a simple life and taking care of their fields and animals, if they have any. Soldiers beat the farmers and in many cases stripped them off their clothes, blind-folded their eyes, handcuffed their hands behind their backs, stuck the whole family together, and locked them in one room for long hours in an inhumane situation and left the place! The saddest and most serious assault on the agricultural sector is the destruction of green fields including trees, crops, water wells, electricity lines, and plastic greenhouses. It is no wonder that agricultural areas have been turned into military bases, and roads for military vehicles use. Add to that, for example, an area of approximately 10,000 square dunums to the east

of Gaza city has been intentionally destroyed by military bulldozers and turned into barren and dissolute areas!

One dismal story is that of a Palestinian farmer, Hussein al-Aiedy, who has been living with his family in the eastern part of Gaza for more than 30 years. Once the army moved, they shelled his home twice. Hardly, he and his wife and children could escape the place to resort to his brother's home next to him. Six members of their families were injured in the blast of day one (three women and three children). Hussein, 58, his mother, 82, his father's second wife, 80, and 27 other people were together. They were his children and the children of his two brothers, stuck between a rock and a hard place. The whole area was controlled by Israeli tanks and armoured vehicles. Their homes were three kilometres from Gaza city. On a condition that they leave everything behind them, they were permitted safe passage out of their place. Thus, they walked for three kilometres holding white flags and passing the Israeli tanks until they reached a safer place in the city. Now, they are homeless! They stay vulnerable in UNRWA schools! Yesterday, Hussein Al-Aiedy saw his house and the three homes of his mother and two brothers, just rubble over its furniture! Everything is lost!

To say the least, everything in Gaza needs long term reconstruction and rehabilitation programmes of different kinds for the children, women, elderly people, hospitals, schools, homes, environment, rural and urban agriculture, and animal life. Material losses have been estimated as two billion dollars with 50% of which were in the field of agriculture!

PARC's emergency relief work and donor support

Therefore, in those unusual dreadful, depressing and unbearable inhumane situations and bloody occurrences, the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC) formed emergency cells of relief work. Each group convenes in their geographical area and keeps up with grassroots organisations. As a first imperative step, PARC has set up urgent relief programmes for immediate execution and other for the next phase. The first plan that PARC has urgently executed was providing some aid (non-food stuff) for escapees and the displaced at UNRWA schools and other scattered locations. There are 40 UNRWA schools that are being used as haven for escapees and the displaced. Each school hosts 80-100 families depending on family's size. PARC has limited resources and funds available, thus, it cannot reach all schools concerned. The executed plan included donating detergents and hygiene kits, children psycho-social tools, infants and children clothes, kerchiefs, and towels. This early intervention targeted 1,000 families. The plan was fulfilled in cooperation with SDC.

Among other urgent plans by PARC is to provide the kitchens of main hospitals with basic food stuff (from what is still available!), as all hospitals in Gaza suffer from shortage of food stuff and drinking water. This plan is to be executed in cooperation with Arab Fund organisation in Kuwait.

PARC intends to continue providing program of distributing fresh food basket named *From Poor Farmer to Poor Family*. This programme serves damaged and displaced families. It is hard to find fresh fruits and vegetables as a result of the Israeli army destroying large areas of cultivated lands, but PARC will try their best to get what is available. This programme will be executed in cooperation with the Christian Aid organisation. This is a permanent programme; it supports 30% of the urban areas farmers.

Also, PARC plans a programme of distributing baskets of canned and dried food for the escapees and displaced families in Gaza Strip. UNRWA will help securing a passage for the food stuff needed. Other future programmes include providing the displaced families with fresh drinking water.

Moreover, PARC's mission includes rehabilitation of the devastated irrigation network, agricultural field roads, animal production assets, greenhouses, agricultural inputs; providing seeds, saplings, fertilizers, irrigation tools, hoses, plastic sheets, and others.

PARC's intervention plans can serve some thousands of people only. In this regard, PARC will save no effort and will extend support to the furthest of its capacity; however PARC's capabilities and funds are limited. Gaza's catastrophic situation needs a well-built support from the world's humanitarian NGOs and donors. In this context, PARC call upon all humanitarian organizations to intervene and support in this situation.

On Friday 16th January 2009, PARC's headquarters in Gaza city were hit and suffered damages. This included the main office building in which some thirty employees and dozens of volunteers usually work. The headquarters also serve some other local agricultural grassroots partner organisations.

Buffer Zone: Anxiety, fear and concern:

PARC expresses a real apprehension and concern about the Israeli army's infiltration into Gaza. A decade ago, the Israelis set a border buffer zone of 50-100 metres. Over time, they extended the buffer zone to 1,000 meters into the east of the Gaza Strip and 2,000 metres into the northern border. PARC is fearful that the Israelis extend that military zone to reach 2,000 metres or more into the east and 3,000 metres into the north, and that they turn it into a *de facto* situation. Thus, the already small agricultural area in the Gaza Strip diminishes. (The cultivable area in Gaza is 17,5000 square dunums; 50,000 square dunums were already damaged by the Israeli army before the invasion. Now, almost 50% of the cultivable land is controlled by the Israeli army). Accordingly, 50% of the farmers have lost their properties; thousands of the farmers and their families will be turned from active producers into unemployed homeless citizens, and an economic burden! The border areas are the most fertile land in Gaza Strip. PARC feels totally angry about the agricultural lands as it constitutes a food basket for the Gaza Strip; it represents a key source of food security to the people of the whole area. Farmers should return to their normal life, lands, water

resources and homes. The farming sector needs strong lobbying and advocacy from world NGOs and political powers.

Update:

Just before dispatching this report, we visited PARC's headquarters and main offices to the West of Zeitun neighbourhood. We were shocked with what we saw. The Israeli army hit the building causing damages to it. Then, they occupied it, taking it over as a military post. They destroyed all the computers, tables, desks, shelves; nothing of the furniture is safe. Files and folders belong to PARC and other agricultural grassroots organisations were destroyed and thrown outside the building to fly and scatter everywhere in the fields. They also totally destroyed the PARC's conference room which was the only means possible to contact PARC in West Bank. Those losses have been estimated as 200 thousand dollars. Tens of micro and small enterprises belonging to a lending and saving programme have been damaged and destroyed also.

Moreover, PARC's garden was destroyed by a bulldozer! All trees, plants, greenhouses, water sources, electric lines, and any other agricultural facilities were devastated and destroyed. Homes of two of PARC's staff were hit. First was PARC's deputy general director/Gaza, Abdulkareem Ashour's house in Gaza was burnt by an Israeli shell and Masoud Kishta's home in Rafah was demolished.

Despite all those loses and miseries, this morning, PARC has rented an apartment inside Gaza city to resume its services with what is available and possible.