

Gaza: Nowhere to go

GAZA CITY, 21 July 2014 (IRIN) - Umm Mustafa, 50, is no stranger to the pain of leaving her home behind. Like many Gazans, the mother of eight finds herself sleeping restlessly in a UN shelter for the third time in eight years.

But this time the displacement is worse than ever. Her husband finds it hard to walk properly having suffered a heart attack shortly after the last Israeli attacks in 2012, and she herself has recently been diagnosed with cancer.

Yet as destruction returned to her hometown of Beit Lahia nine days ago, the family packed up once again. "With every war on Gaza, we are forced to leave [our homes]," she said wearily as she recalled her trip to Gaza City. "There was continuous bombing around our house and the Israelis threatened the residents in our area. We wanted at least to save our lives." The Israeli armed forces stress that they have warned, rather than threatened, Gazans to vacate areas they intend to target.

They are now sleeping in a school run by UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees. The conditions are hardly suitable for the ill. Her spacious family home has been replaced by a 30 square-metre classroom she shares with 40 members of her extended family. They have brought with them a few blankets and pillows, but there is hardly space for them all to lie down.

And every hour, more arrive. Following the start of a ground invasion by Israeli forces on 17 July, thousands more Gazans have abandoned their homes.

Five days ago, UNRWA was sheltering around 22,000 people. That number has now nearly quadrupled to over 85,000 - far more than during the devastating three-week 2008 war dubbed "Cast Lead". Thousands of others have moved to stay with friends or relatives. Whole areas in the east of Gaza City have all but emptied, with families moving into the centre of the city to avoid the shelling. Al-Shifa hospital, too, has become an unofficial shelter for the displaced.

Despite a [call](#) for an immediate ceasefire by the UN Security Council, the violence showed little signs of abating. Sunday 20 July was the most deadly day since the latest round of hostilities began on 8 July, with 13 Israeli soldiers and more than 100 Palestinians killed, mostly civilians. Over 500 Palestinians and 20 Israelis (18 of them soldiers) have died so far.

Cramped conditions

Fears of overcrowding in the shelters are growing more acute by the hour. Chris Gunness, spokesperson for UNRWA, said the maximum number of people they could accommodate in their facilities would be around 100,000 - though that would be "very cramped".

He added that they had launched an emergency appeal for US\$60 million, which would cover one month of emergency work and 3-6 months of a recovery phase for repair and rebuilding.

"If governments don't respond [to the appeal] in the next days, our emergency work will be curtailed," he said.

In the school IRIN visited, and where Umm Mustafa was holed up, hundreds of people slept in classrooms. A shortage of mattresses meant some were sleeping on the hard floor. Families tried to maintain their privacy by stacking desks to corner off parts of the room, while they shared food and supplies with those around them.

Sumaya, a 40-year-old mother of eight, sat playing with her grandson, whose mother - Sumaya's daughter - had died (not in the bombing). She told IRIN her sons were already unemployed before this latest escalation of hostilities and had been unable to study due to the crippling financial crisis in Gaza.

"And it is not only money we lack, but also security and personal safety. If we cannot provide our families with their basic needs, at least we try to move them to safety," she said.

Many of the displaced IRIN spoke to had been told to leave their homes by the Israeli army. Mohammed, 37, was queuing patiently in the shelter with his 18-month-old baby, waiting for milk for the child and tinned food for the rest of his family. He said he had left his home after the Israeli Air Force flew overhead, dropping a barrage of leaflets. "Leave or you will be at risk," they warned.

Yet, with the borders with Egypt and Israel still [all but closed](#) due to a seven-year blockade on Gaza, the enclave remains effectively sealed off. Mohammed echoed a popular refrain for those in the shelter when he asked: "Where are we going to go?"

"We [are here] for the sake of our children," he added. "We know there is no safe place in Gaza."

UNRWA condemns storage of rockets in school

Indeed, UNRWA has announced that 64 of its properties have been damaged since the start of the crisis, while fears of the politicization of shelter have grown since the discovery of 20 rockets in one of the UNRWA's vacant schools. Israel has long accused Hamas and other militant groups of storing weapons inside civilian buildings.

UNRWA has since been criticized by Israeli politicians, while Channel Two, Israel's top TV news network, even alleged that a UNRWA ambulance was used to transport militants in Gaza on 19 July - a claim it has since retracted and apologized for.

Gunness said it was dangerous for Israeli politicians and the media to make such accusations and also condemned the storage of weapons in the school.

"This incident, which is the first of its kind in Gaza, endangered civilians including staff and put at risk UNRWA's vital mission to assist and protect Palestine refugees in Gaza," he said.

Asked what was being done to ensure those seeking shelter are not put in danger again, Gunness said the agency had begun an inquiry into the circumstances.

"UNRWA has strong, established procedures to maintain the neutrality of all its premises, including a strict no-weapons policy... UNRWA will uphold and further reinforce its procedures," he said.

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Theme (s): Conflict, Refugees/IDPs, Security.

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