

## Life among the ruins in Gaza

By Amira Hass



GAZA - Wadi Gaza is an agricultural region southeast of Gaza City. The ruins of Hussein al Aaidy's family home are immediately apparent. The houses (and several other heaps of ruins) are scattered among budding hills, lazing goats and fields that have been plowed but not sown. Up until nine years ago, these houses were surrounded by orchards and other fruit trees. Until the Israel Defense Forces bulldozers uprooted everything in order to safeguard the Israelis driving to the settlement of Netzarim.

The thousands of heaps of ruins in the Strip have now become part of the landscape. What attracts attention is when one pile of ruins or another disappears. The Gaza Public Works Bureau has already solicited bids for clearing away the ruins of several public buildings and several mosques. Building contractors have begun to evacuate the rubble, and tents have been set up on the site in order to serve the public and for prayers.

But these are the exceptions. There is no point in clearing away the ruins of the 4,000 buildings and homes that have been totally destroyed, so long as Israel does not permit building materials to be brought into the Strip.

The Gazan Ministry of Public Works also warns citizens not to clear away ruins through private initiative: It's too dangerous. At least 50,000 people, members of 8,000 families whose homes have been destroyed, know that the temporary solution they have found is liable to become a long-term one.

"And that's not a solution," says Al Aaidy, whose family is now dispersed among several houses, far from the plot of land they bought years ago and cultivated with a great deal of love. His mother, Kamela, 80, refused to leave her land.

The expulsion from Be'er Sheva in 1948 was enough for her. Now she lives by herself in what used to be the family goat pen (the goats fled or were killed: One hen survived and is still alive and pecking in the soil of the goat pen). She stores some of her possessions in a rusty bus that they dragged to the site a long time ago. She heats up tea on a bonfire.

"You can see the ruins of the house, you can't see the ruins in our soul," says Hussein al Aaidy, a man in his 50s. He was a Fatah activist, a prisoner in Israel from the 1970s who was freed during the prisoner exchange deal in 1985. After his release, he worked at several jobs, so as to be able to build a house for his family.

The Al Aaidys thought that the ground invasion of Israel's Gaza campaign would be like the previous ones: that the shelling and the shooting would be outside the house, and that they would be safe inside it. His brothers' families, who live nearby in buildings with ceilings of asbestos and tin, joined him on Saturday, January 3, 2009, on the eve of the ground attack and when the bombing intensified.

"All of us, 30 people, were in one inner room, on the second floor," said Kamela this past Sunday. "I was lying on a mattress, I wrapped my head in a mandil [a head kerchief] and a thick scarf. Because of the cold."

At about 8 P.M., something pierced the air and the three stories of the concrete house: A shell? A missile from a helicopter or a drone? They didn't know. Dust, fragments of concrete and shouting filled the room in which they were crowded. Kamela al Aaidy would later discover that her head kerchief was soaked with blood.

She had been wounded by shrapnel in her head; today, she still gets dizzy when she gets up and walks. They ran from the partially demolished house to one of the buildings in the yard - in the hope that the forces that were shelling would see them and understand that they were civilians. Six people were injured by shrapnel: Kamela, her sister-in-law and four children. They contacted friends and relatives to call for medical assistance. They discovered that the IDF was not allowing rescue teams access to them.

Haaretz accompanied the efforts of Physicians for Human Rights to have them rescued, and reported daily and in real time about the situation: They were almost without food, without medicine, little water, cold, shelling and firing all around. But only on Friday, January 9, almost seven days after they had been wounded - after exhausting negotiations on the part of PHR and phone conversations conducted by Hussein al Aaidy himself with soldiers or officers in the Coordination and Liaison Authority for the Gaza Strip - was the first evacuation allowed: four of the wounded and four escorts.

### **Healthy carried the wounded**

They walked for about 1.5 kilometers, the healthy ones carrying the seriously injured on stretchers: The wounds of the children Ragheda and Nur, who were injured by shrapnel all over their bodies, were beginning to become infected; they began to lose consciousness. Before their evacuation, Hussein had cut into Ragheda's flesh with a knife - two of his brothers held her as she screamed and cried - and sterilized the wound with salt water. The grandmother, Kamela, shakes her head as she tells us this, as though she wanted to chase away the memory.

The next day, Saturday morning, a week after they were shelled, the healthy ones and the two wounded women also left. They understood that it was dangerous to remain in the area, as "every moment we expected another shell to fall on us, to be wounded again, perhaps killed," explains Hussein, almost apologizing for "abandoning" the house. Their departure was preceded by negotiations over the phone conducted by Al Aaidy, who speaks Hebrew, with an officer or soldier in the liaison office.

"They wanted us to take a six-kilometer detour: I refused," he recalls. "They demanded that we go south, to the area of Netzarim. I refused. In the end, they agreed to let us go north, near the Karni Crossing. But there were conditions: That each of us would be a meter away from the next person. That we wouldn't stop. That we wouldn't put down the children, whom we adults were carrying on our backs. That we wouldn't put down my mother, whom two of us carried together. They told me: If we can't count the 22 people who left the house, anyone who sees you from a helicopter or a tank, will fire at you."

One of the conditions was that they would carry a white flag, and that scared them most of all. "I was in all the wars and none of them was so difficult. In none of them did they kill people waving white flags, as they did this time," explained Kamela. "And when we marched, I was already in despair, I wanted them to put me down. Leave me on the road and I'll die, I told my sons."

The exhausted convoy marched for about 700 meters, according to Hussein al Aaidy's estimate, until they encountered a group of tanks. One soldier got out of the tank, aimed his rifle at the convoy and ordered them to stop. "That was lucky, that way we could rest a little, we put down the children and Mother," recalls Al Aaidy with a little smile. The soldiers ordered him to approach. "There was a dog with the soldiers. They cocked their weapons. As though they wanted to scare us. I told the soldier: We're leaving by prior arrangement, contact your commanders. And the soldier answered me: 'I won't contact anyone.' We waited like that for 20 minutes. The way a person waits for death." The three kilometers until they reached the ambulances took about an hour and a half to two hours - they no longer remember precisely.

And since then they can't find a place for themselves, says Al Aaidy. When the attack stopped, they were astonished to discover that the IDF had blown up their house.

"From the school where we hid during the attack we wandered to relatives, from those relatives to other relatives, from them we dispersed among rented apartments. The children switched schools, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1085622.html>

they can't concentrate on their studies and don't show any interest, all their books and games and notebooks were buried, everyone is jittery, they quarrel, the children don't want to be here, on the land next to the demolished house, they wake up at night from nightmares, shouting. And our case is relatively mild: There are no dead, as in other families." Al Aaidy shows me an electronic board he found among the ruins, apparently from a missile that landed on the house.

"If all this science is designed to destroy, then maybe it would be better to go back to the Jahaliya," he muses, referring to the pre-Islamic age of ignorance.

The IDF Spokesman responds: "From the moment of the attack, direct contact was established between the affected residents and the army, and an attempt was made to evacuate them from the Gaza Strip, so they could receive medical care in Israel.

"The residents were evacuated at the first opportunity at which they would not have been exposed to mortal danger from the fighting that was taking place in the area. In order to provide additional information about the attack, we would need precise location coordinates. As we were not provided with that information, we are unable to clarify the matter."