

## THE GAZA STRIP

The powerful seven passenger Mercedes taxi slides out of its parking space, winds through the hills and pine forests surrounding Jerusalem, past the vineyards and stately buildings of the Latrun Monastery and out onto green lush, cultivated plains. It races southeast across fertile farmland towards the sea, turning sharply south as dunes begin to appear and vegetation thins. Pushing ever faster, like a horse nearing home, the taxi blasts past the border sentries whose machine guns hang casually from the shoulders and into the Gaza Strip.

How different the scenery is! Gaza farmers lack innovative, sophisticated irrigation techniques. Overpopulation in the Strip and keen competition from neighboring Israeli wells have contributed to a lowering water table and salt intrusion. The land at the northern end of the Strip is mostly arid dunes and scrub brush relieved by date palm groves. Along the roadside children sell huge bunches of green grapes, a major product of the Strip. Donkeys pull flat carts along the shoulder and pick-up trucks discharge some of the 36,000 men and women who commute daily into Israel to pick crops, work construction and do menial labor in the service industry.

These Gaza workers earn a top salary of \$15 per day. While it is technically illegal to employ children under the age of 16, many children from the Gaza Strip do go to Israel on a daily

### FAMINE IN ETHIOPIA

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#### ANERA

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Hammar skjold embroidery design was created to commemorate the visit of the U.N. Secretary-General to Gaza.

basis to perform backbreaking labor for the equivalent of \$5 per day. Naturally, since they are illegal unregistered workers, they lack whatever minimal protection might exist for their adult counterparts. Residents of the Gaza Strip must provide their own transportation to their jobs, feed themselves, and they are forbidden by law from spending the night inside Israel. Since the 1967 military occupation at least one half of the adult male working population has been part of this human resource expatriation. Gaza has, in many respects, become a huge labor camp.

Approaching Gaza town for the first time can be something of a shock. The first impression is of the overwhelming crush of humanity. At the formation of the Jewish State in 1948, this sunny stretch of Mediterranean coast was home to approximately 80,000 people. Its population was increased overnight by another 180,000 souls in the winter of 1948. By the time of the June 1967 military occupation of the Strip, the population had increased to nearly 400,000. The number of people in the Gaza Strip dropped dramatically during the first year of occupation. At least 30,000 people left under systematic encouragement. Through naturally high rate increases, the population regained its 1967 level by 1974 and today half a million people inhabit the tiny plot of land; thirty miles long and about five miles wide. Only one quarter of these are indigenous Gazans. It is one of the most densely populated spots on earth, and also one of the most highly

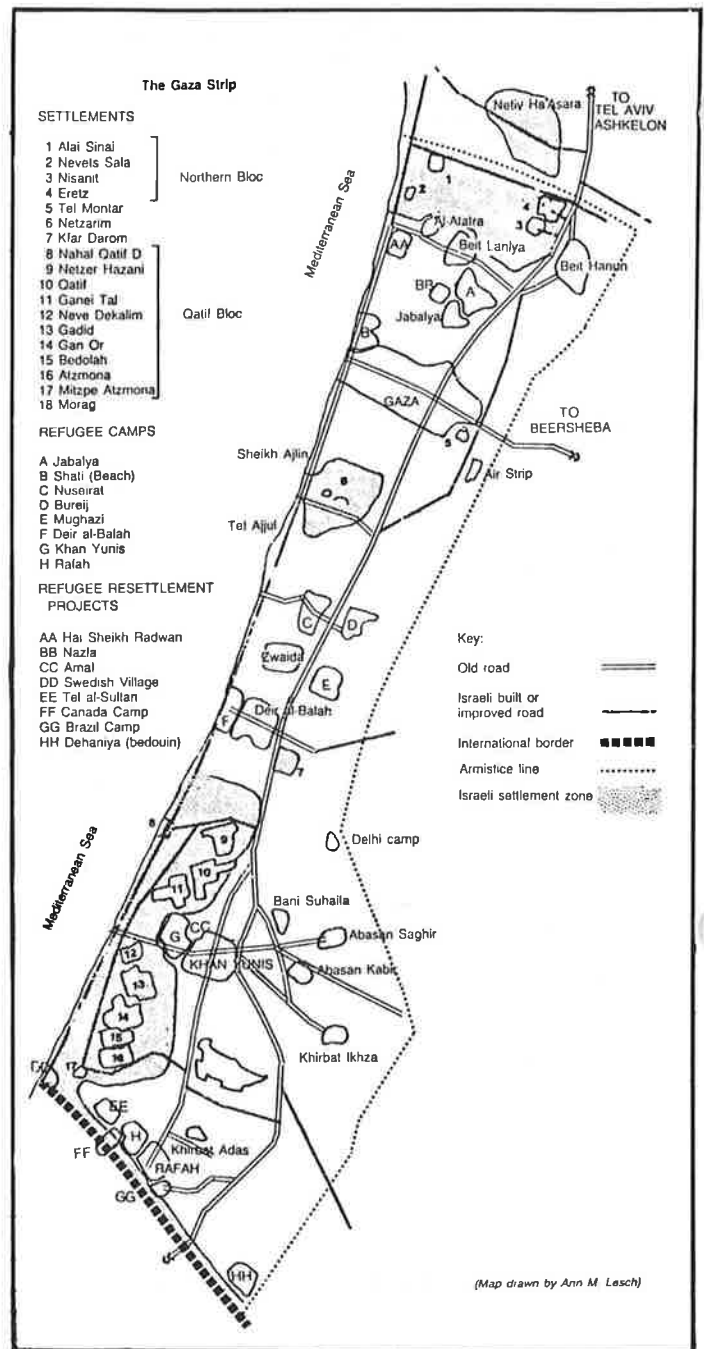
urbanized, with at least 85% of the population in the main towns of Gaza, Khan Younis and Rafah. Until the huge population influx, Rafah was no more than a border train station. Gaza's population today is very young, with 50% of its people under the age of 15.

The taxi slows to a crawl to negotiate streets clogged with pedestrians, cars, trucks, donkey carts and vendors hawking everything from fruit juice to rubber sandals. Gaza town is an ancient settlement spot on the road from Cairo to Damascus and Constantinople, Istanbul today. It is also a port town. Being a crossroads of trade, it has also been a crossroads of military conquest throughout its 4000 year history. Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Turks, Crusaders, and the Ottomans have swept through Gaza on their way to larger places. Napoleon visited here as well. Gaza was part of the British Empire and a British graveyard stands at the town entrance. Despite conquerors using Gaza as a passageway, the Strip has maintained a very substantial Arab population since before the Islamic conquest in 632 A.D.

Today the people of the Strip are remarkably homogeneous sedentary Sunni Muslim Arab. There is a small nomadic bedouin population, also Sunni Muslim, a tiny, well-integrated Christian minority, and an even smaller gypsy community. The gypsies are famous for their singing and dancing abilities and they are in enormous demand as entertainers at festive wedding parties.

The men of the Gaza Strip wear a traditional costume very similar to that of their counterparts in the West Bank. Its hallmark is modesty; a long, loose-fitting gown worn over long cotton trousers. On formal occasions or on chilly days, traditionally dressed men will don a fine wool robe, usually in a dark color. Their heads are covered by a cap and draping cloth, secured by a black wool cord. Most of the younger generation opt for more Western dress styles.

The traditional women of Gaza have a very distinctive costume. A loose black gown is worn over any ankle length dress and a long sheer white scarf is wrapped around the head and shoulders. In the streets the scarf is wrapped so only the eyes can be seen. Some refugee women adopt this black and white outfit in the streets, covering their own long embroidered dresses. Others choose simply to wear the dresses of their home villages. The knowledgeable observer



Bedouin near the Sinai.

can identify the region and perhaps even the village of Palestine the woman hails from by her dress design and the embroidery. Young women, like young men, prefer modest Western dress.

Alighting from the taxi at the teeming Gaza town center one can look right across the street into the quiet shady grounds of Al-Ahli Hospital, an institution run by the local Anglican Church. The Gaza Strip has five other hospitals including one pediatric hospital and one ophthalmic hospital. These institutions are small, understaffed and inadequately equipped and maintained. Four of them are the direct responsibility of the occupation authorities. Health care services are supplemented by UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) clinics, government outreach clinics and mother/child care centers. Unfortunately, the great majority of these facilities are located in Gaza town itself and the rest of the Strip is therefore severely deprived of

adequate health care. The area of Rafah, with 60,000 people, is not served by a hospital. There are something less than two beds per thousand people in the Strip. Health conditions have steadily deteriorated under the pressures of population, extreme water shortages, and inadequate or non-existent garbage and sewage disposal. In many refugee camps, raw sewage flows in open gutters along the streets. In a series of three major projects, ANERA assisted the Gaza Municipality in its program of installing sewers in poor neighborhoods. As might be expected, intestinal infections are the number one killer of infants in the area. Gaza residents who lack UNRWA refugee status must purchase government health insurance, which by Gaza standards is very, very expensive.

From this same taxi stand one could take a taxi to any point in the Gaza Strip. Choose a taxi headed for the Egyptian border at Rafah and see some of the loveliest scenery you could imagine. You will pass verdant stands of date palms, deep green orange and lemon groves and rich gardens. Traditionally, the Gaza economy rested on its status as a port and on agriculture. The 1948 establishment of Israel denied Gaza town access to the areas it had historically served as a trade center and many farmers lost significant farmlands to the east of the present day borders of the Strip. Citrus, date and grape production continued to be important mainstays of Gaza's agriculture. Today, despite handicaps placed by the occupation authorities, agricultural production continues to be a cornerstone of Gaza's economy.

Fishing has also been a main element of the economy and fish a large part of the diet. Fishermen's cooperatives have been allowed cold storage for the fish and cold packing that permits shipping of the fish into Israel but no canning facilities exist. The area in which Gazans may fish is strictly limited to no more than eight or nine miles out to sea and within the northern and southern boundaries of the Strip. Reduced catches and limitations on the processing of the catch serve to weaken this Gaza industry as well.

Moving south through the Gaza Strip, you come to the next major town, Khan Younis, smaller than Gaza, but full of vitality. The town square is totally dominated by a huge stone fort built by a Mamluk sultan more than five hundred years ago.

South of Khan Younis the land begins to show our approach to the desert that is the Sinai Peninsula. Gold sands replace green and the distinctive summer housing of the bedouin can be seen along the road. These are large, round, low structures, blackish-brown, made of a thatching of twigs and grasses. Carefully watered miniature peach trees, whose juicy fruit belie the aridity of the surroundings, dot the appearing dunes.

The town of Rafah is crowded and sandy. If you arrive on a Friday morning, you will be able to visit the big bedouin market. Men haggle in the midst of flocks of sheep and goats. Women squat on the ground behind huge mounds of new and used clothing. You may buy a whole embroidered dress, hand sewn by the women in their spare time, or buy a pair of sleeves or a yoke. The dresses for the older women are a riot of color — oranges, reds, pinks, greens and purples — embroidered in patterns of flowers, moons, stars, tents or talismans. Dresses for younger, unmarried girls are embroidered in solid blue, to preserve modesty and protect from evil. You can also buy heavy bedouin silver here, as well as aluminum cookware, laquer trays or electrical appliances.

Leaving Rafah and turning east to the sea the taxi will jolt



Mamluk fort in Khan Younis

along an unpaved coastal road towards Gaza town. You will pass archaeological mounds so rich that the pottery shards can be simply picked up from the roadside. At Deir Al-Balah, a small village a few miles south of Gaza town, an ongoing archaeological excavation has uncovered graves, a fortress and living quarters that the associated artifacts date to pharaonic times, more than 1000 years before Christ. This same coastal road will bring you into a refugee camp near Deir Al-Balah.

The camp, like other refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, consists of densely packed one-story structures made of concrete blocks and corrugated iron roofs. The roofs are held down against the wind with rocks. Houses made this way are hot in the summer and cold in the winter. Many streets are merely unpaved alleys, not broad enough for a car. They are mud or dust depending on the season. Garbage and sewage attract rats and swarms of flies. Children crowd the doorways and race barefoot through the streets. Their little faces smile through the grime of a day's play. Women struggle to their houses with heavy jerry cans filled with water from the community spigot. Frequently the water runs only four hours a day. This water supply, often unsanitary, is used for cooking, drinking, bathing and laundry, done by hand. Life in these camps is brutal. There are almost no amenities or physical comforts. The sheer hard work and drudgery of day-to-day existence ages people quickly. The men leave home for work inside Israel before dawn and return in the evening, tired and discouraged. Often what they earn is little more than a subsistence wage.

ANERA assists a number of institutions in the Gaza Strip that offer a wide range of services to their communities. A rainwater conservation project, long stalled, is about to begin. This project will provide clean water for drinking and irrigation by saving heretofore wasted rainwater resources. The Sun Daycare Center offers educational assistance to mentally retarded children of the Gaza Strip. It is the only institution of its kind. ANERA also offers grants in cash and in kind (pharmaceuticals) to UNRWA for the range of community services they provide to Palestinian refugees in the Strip. The Gaza Y.M.C.A. offers local residents a number of programs including cultural activities and sports. ANERA is proud to be able to assist the "Y" in its work. There are other worthwhile institutions offering critically needed

services to Gazans that ANERA has tried to assist. However, serious delays in grant approvals from the military authorities have not allowed either the Palestinian Women's Union or the Red Crescent Society of Gaza access to the allocated funds. These two organizations, with strong community support, provide libraries, literacy training, vocational training, daycare facilities, and health and dental care to a population desperately in need of these services.

One hears very little about Gaza. It lacks the religious significance of the West Bank and it is not claimed by any Arab nation, save the Palestinians. However, Gaza is as beautiful and vital a corner of this earth as one will ever see. It is a microcosm of the Palestinians' tragedy, of the terrible difficulties of development and of simple human drama. ANERA is happy to be able to lend its assistance to Palestinian institutions meeting the needs of their community and enjoins all readers to remember the people of the Gaza Strip.



Bedouin woman.

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*This issue of the ANERA Newsletter was written by Martha Abou-Amer, Executive Assistant*

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