



in this issue

1-2

Gaza's Stark Reality
by Sean Carroll

3

Update On Our
Gaza Emergency Response
as of January 4, 2024

3

Thank You for Going Above and
Beyond for Gaza

4-5

Voices from Gaza:
Sandra Rasheed Reflects on Some of
her Colleagues in Gaza

6

Winter Resilience:
Navigating Challenges in Lebanon
by Samar El Yassir

Photo: Women making bread with flour
Anera delivered in Rafah, Gaza.
Photo by Ibrahim Zanoun.

Gaza's Stark Reality

by Sean Carroll

From December 19 to 21, I visited Gaza, primarily in the relatively safer areas, navigating through the southern Rafah Governorate and up to Deir Al Balah in the middle region. However, even in these zones with reduced bombing and fighting, the stark reality of the calamity unfolding at an alarming pace became evident.

Going through old refugee camps and newly formed informal settlements of internally displaced people (IDPs), the catastrophic situation loomed large. Despite seeking refuge in the few safer areas, Gazans conveyed a sense of dread, feeling as if they were "being chased by death." Their desperation for a ceasefire and the opportunity to return home, even knowing their residences no longer exist, were heart-wrenching.

I witnessed the crippling grief of a colleague who received the devastating news that his mother, brother, and their family had perished in a bomb attack in Gaza City. The harrowing experience of being unable to save his loved ones, combined with the challenge of obtaining information amid communication constraints, highlighted the anguish faced by many families in Gaza.

In the midst of this ongoing crisis, no place in Gaza is truly safe. The constant sounds of warplanes, drones, and bombs create an unnerving atmosphere.

Although Gazans have grown accustomed to these disruptions, their stoicism does not diminish the fear that permeates their lives. "We fear the nights," confessed one of my hosts.

continued on page 2

credits

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The most immediate way you can help our response in Gaza is by donating at:

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Gaza's Stark Reality

continued from p. 1

Even in what is considered a relatively secure area like Rafah, where numerous international humanitarian aid organizations operate, the threat persists. The constant bombardments kept me awake at night, emphasizing the pervasive insecurity.

The Overcrowding in Rafah Is Untenable

With more than 85% of Gaza's population now internally displaced, the majority converges on the southwest corner of Rafah. **This confined space, about the size of LAX airport in Los Angeles, is inundated with IDPs, creating overcrowded and untenable living conditions.**

During my two-day visit, I focused on the city of Rafah and two significant IDP settlements. One, situated at the "Qatari Hospital," houses over 70,000 Palestinians in an unfinished concrete shell and a surrounding tent city. The second settlement sprawls across streets and open spaces around Al Quds Open University, lacking essential resources and facing an influx of more IDPs.

Desperate Living Conditions and Coping Mechanisms

The dire living conditions in Rafah, marked by insufficient food, water, shelter, and healthcare, underscore the urgency of the situation. Coping mechanisms, both resourceful and negative, are emerging. While Palestinians demonstrate resilience, improvising ways to manage without electricity and water, some solutions are unsustainable. Trees are being cut down for firewood, exacerbating environmental issues, and long lines for scarce toilets contribute to health concerns.

Healthcare workers are grappling with a rise in urinary tract infections, kidney stones, diarrhea, hepatitis, and other diseases. UNOCHA reports highlight the compounding impact of food scarcity, poor hygiene, and inadequate living conditions, emphasizing the need for immediate intervention.

Aid Shortcomings and Urgent Needs

Despite the pressing need for aid, the current flow into Gaza falls short of the required speed and scale. Only 177 aid trucks entered Gaza on the day of my arrival, and while the Kerem Shalom crossing's recent reopening boosted numbers, it remains insufficient. **Five key issues must be addressed to improve aid distribution: increasing the amount and efficiency of aid delivery, eliminating political interference, streamlining the process, enhancing collaboration among aid agencies, and, most importantly, securing a cessation of bombings for safe and effective aid delivery.**

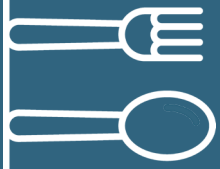
Looking Ahead: Ceasefire and Recovery

As I observed firsthand the desperate conditions in Gaza, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification declared an **imminent risk of famine for the entire population**. Urgent action is needed to prevent over half a million people from facing catastrophic conditions.

Beyond increased aid, the international community must prioritize a ceasefire to halt hostilities. The Palestinians, enduring overcrowded shelters and lacking essentials, express a collective desire to return home. This fundamental aspiration should be a cornerstone of any post-war agreement, signaling hope for recovery and rebuilding shattered lives.

By the Numbers: Anera's Deliveries in Gaza Since the War's Start

as of January 5, 2023



10,032,140
meal servings



3,791
blankets

1,986
mattresses



1,720,468
medical treatments



80,640
bottles of water

90
psychosocial sessions



21,978
hygiene kits



5
pop-up health clinics



8,500
clothing vouchers

55
shelters (re)cleaned



During moments of crisis, the true measure of humanity is often revealed by the actions of those who choose to help.

So many of you created birthday fundraisers, hosted bake sales, ran marathons, donated proceeds from your small businesses, hosted and created fundraising events, asked for donations in lieu of wedding gifts, created raffles, and so, so much more.

Your support did not just deliver items and meals, it provided brief moments of relief to those who fear they've been forgotten. Thank you for being a source of light amid the darkness and for giving your time, talent, and treasure to help Palestinians in need.

THANK YOU!

Voices from Gaza

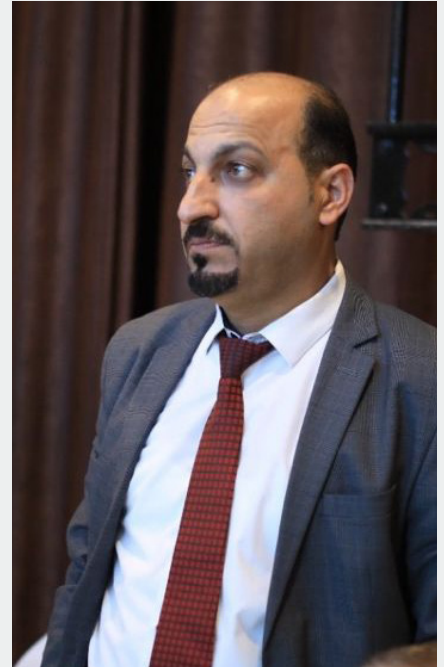
Sandra Rasheed reflects on some of her colleagues in Gaza

SAMI MATAR

This is Sami. It began with him. When I instructed him to stay put until it was safe to work, he declared, "I will die serving my people." Now, 61 days into the war, he and the team tirelessly provide hot meals, fresh produce, and food parcels to the 1.8 million displaced Palestinians in Gaza.

In our conversations, he hurriedly shares the latest challenges and achievements before the line cuts off. He often asks, "How much longer? When will this stop?" And my response is always that we are fervently praying for a swift end. Despite moments of exasperation, proclaiming, "We can't do it anymore. It's impossible," he somehow makes it work daily. "Our people need us. They are forgotten. Who will take care of them if we don't?" Every call ends with "God protect you all" and "God be with you during this time."

Today, operations are limited to Rafah, providing only a third of our previous assistance due to kitchens in Deir Al Balah and Khan Younis being inaccessible. I echo the same questions: How much longer? When will this stop? Your continued plea for a permanent ceasefire is crucial.



ASHRAF AL SHOBAKY

We have some gentle giants among us, and Ashraf is one of them. A vital part of our response, he joined Sami early on, leaving his family in the north to serve the people of Gaza for over 75 days. Throughout this period, he dedicated himself to delivering aid to fellow Gazans — 90% of whom have been displaced, some multiple times.

Today, we learned the heartbreaking news that Ashraf lost over 20 family members, including his mother and brother, whom he hadn't seen since leaving Gaza over 2½ months ago. He received this devastating news while preparing to deliver our aid. Simultaneously, we discovered that Sami's aunt and niece were killed.

Hearing their story left us feeling helpless and angry. These stories shouldn't be happening, with indiscriminate killing affecting civilians in this ugly war on Gaza. Witnessing the real people behind the daily horrors, we urge everyone to take action: protest, petition, call your representatives daily, and pray.

A ceasefire is urgently needed.



Anera's Palestine Country Director Sandra Rasheed dedicated the past month to reflecting on some of her colleagues in Gaza and offering insights into their stories. Through posts on Sandra's LinkedIn profile spread over the month, she shared the experiences of individuals who tirelessly serve their communities amidst the daily horrors of life in Gaza. (As of this writing, on January 5, all staff are accounted for and physically unharmed.)

(The wording has been lightly edited from her original posts.)

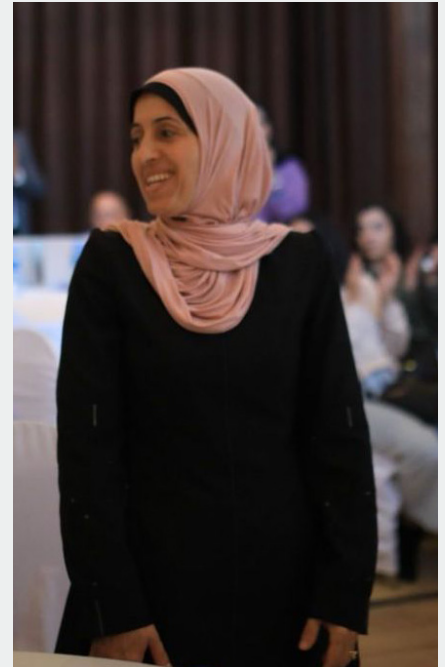
SUAD LUBBAD

Today, I spoke with Suad Lubbad, a devoted Anera staff member in Gaza. Throughout the war, Suad has been the [Anera] shelter coordinator, guiding psychosocial support activities in the shelter.

Beyond a colleague, Suad is a friend, mother, and sister to everyone, offering quiet strength to those who are anxious and scared. Despite personal heartbreak, including her sister's loss and displacement, Suad consistently prioritizes others' needs.

In our conversation, she shared, "This is a learning experience. Men at the shelter who didn't know how to bake bread are now doing so. People who couldn't light a fire before now do it every night, using fire for cooking, boiling water, and staying warm. Water conservation and recycling have become habits. People shifted from individual gains to collective goals. We pray for an end to this hardship. It's challenging, but we are here."

Suad embodies our team's resilience, giving selflessly amid personal losses.



IBRAHIM ZANOUN

Anera's photographer, Ibrahim, has been documented the war's impact in the north and south, facing challenges as he traveled with his pregnant wife and young daughter in November. Constantly at risk, witnessing heartbreaking scenes, Ibrahim worried for his family's safety, particularly his wife's well-being during potential labor. They safely reached Khan Younis, and recently, Ibrahim shared the news of his wife giving birth to a baby girl named "Hayat," symbolizing life and steadfastness.

Hayat's birth was challenging; two weeks past the due date, Ibrahim's wife was turned away from hospitals focused on life-threatening cases. With no means for induction or anesthesia for a potential C-section, they were advised to pray.

The name "Hayat," meaning life, stands as a testament to Palestinians' unwavering willpower during the war. As Rafeef Ziadah beautifully puts it, "We Palestinians teach life after they have occupied the last sky."

Mabrook to Ibrahim and his wife on their new addition. Life persists for our people in Gaza, and we all pray for a permanent ceasefire soon.



Winter Resilience Navigating Challenges in Lebanon

BY SAMAR EL YASSIR
COUNTRY DIRECTOR FOR LEBANON

In Lebanon, we usher in the beginning of winter with heartfelt prayers for our brothers and sisters in Palestine. The assault on Gaza has persisted for 91 days as of this writing, with the West Bank grappling with heightened violence and increased restrictions. Meanwhile, **Lebanon, still coping with a four-year economic collapse, experiences bombardments at its southern border not witnessed since 2006.**

Urgent measures are in motion, **utilizing donations to aid families in preparing for the colder months.** In Lebanon, this involves empowering youth with vital skills like sewing, enabling them to earn income while supplying essential warm clothing and bedding for displaced families. Youth are also engaged in preparing and distributing hot meals, ensuring families are well-nourished and fortified against potential winter illnesses.

Our sustained winterization efforts, rooted in sustainable and integrated models, have been adapting to evolving needs during the winter months. These needs have incrementally grown each year since the onset of the economic crisis, and the recent mass displacement from Lebanon's southern border has intensified the strain on vulnerable families. Since October, nearly 60,000 people have been displaced from the south of the country, exacerbating the pressure on already struggling communities.

While warm clothing and hot meals may not be deemed luxuries, for many they signify the sole sources of comfort and reassurance in these uncertain times. Families have weathered years of hardship, contending with escalating poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity in Lebanon. The ongoing escalations and threats in the south have heightened anxieties and tensions, pushing an already vulnerable population to the brink. **Your support this winter holds the power to make a substantial difference for families across the Middle East,** providing them with the resources not only to endure today but to nurture hope for tomorrow.



THEY NEED YOUR SUPPORT IN 2024



anera.org/donate

Rafah, Gaza, Palestine | December 2023



"I give them this opportunity, but I also end up being a counselor, a supporter, and a cheerleader for them."

– Ibtisam Salem speaking about her work with women at CSSL

In memoriam:

Ibtisam Salem of CSSL, Gaza

We mourn the tragic loss of Ibtisam Salem, director of the Cooperative Society for Saving and Lending (CSSL) in Gaza. Her work, empowering women through economic, social, and psychological opportunities, left a lasting impact. Anera has worked with Ibtisam and CSSL on myriad projects, including our Farms to Fosool program that employs women to create farm-fresh meals for preschoolers in Gaza.

Sandra Rasheed, Anera's Palestine country director, remembers Ibtisam's dedication: "She took widows, women heads of households, and survivors of violence, giving them a chance to take control of their lives. She is a great loss – a beautiful human being."

In the face of this tragedy, we underscore the urgency of an immediate ceasefire to prevent further loss of life.

GAZA'S STARK REALITY

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Muhammad Atieh and Hadeel Abu Obaid, members of Anera's medical donations team, stand in front of a cargo plane filled with 100 pallets of donated medical aid. This vital assistance, organized by Anera, is poised for departure from the Jordan Military Airport in Marka, destined for Gaza.