

'Every moment I fear losing another child': Newborns freeze to death in Gaza tents

Monday 13 January 2025, by [AMER Ruwaida Kamal](#) (Date first published: 9 January 2025).

As displaced Palestinians endure a second winter in makeshift shelters, the death of at least six infants from exposure has sent parents into a panic.

Contents

- [No shelter or food](#)
- [I do what I can as a mother](#)
- [A cycle of displacement](#)

When Yahya Al-Batran's wife gave birth to healthy twins at the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir Al-Balah on Dec. 6, 2024, he felt lucky. "The birth was good, and they did not suffer from any diseases," he recalled. "I named them 'Ali and Juma'a."

Although Al-Batran, 40, wanted his newborn sons to stay in the hospital's nursery, the severe overcrowding at the facility forced him to bring them back to the tent on the beach where he had been sheltering with his parents, his wife, and their six children.

In November 2023, fearing for the safety of his elderly and disabled parents, Al-Batran and his family fled their home in [Beit Lahiya](#) to Al-Maghazi camp in Deir Al-Balah. When Israeli forces bombed the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) school where they were sheltering 10 days later, killing Al-Batran's cousin, the family moved to Deir Al-Balah, where extreme overcrowding forced them to join other families on the beach.



"We have been living this difficult life for more than a year and two months," Al-Batran told +972. His appeals to humanitarian institutions to provide him with a better tent — or anything to protect his children from the cold — have gone unanswered.

After returning to the tent with the newborns, heavy rainfall began. Soon, Al-Batran's tent was [flooded with water](#), leaving nothing to keep his children warm. "When I woke up in the morning on Dec. 28, I found [Juma'a] had died from the cold; his heart had stopped," he recalled.

Palestinians cook under the rain, using a clay oven in a displacement camp in Khan Yunis, Gaza Strip, December 31, 2024. (Doaa Albaz/Activestills)

'Ali, Juma'a's brother, barely survived. He is currently being treated in the hospital nursery, but doctors have warned Al-Batran that his condition is critical, and he may die at any moment.

"Every moment I fear losing another one of my children; I stand helpless in front of them," Al-Batran

lamented. "The tent insults human dignity, and the world is silent in the face of this insult."



Yahya Al-Batran holds the body of his days-old son, who died from exposure in the family tent on the beach in Gaza, December 28, 2024. (Ruwaida Amer)

No shelter or food

As Israel continues its [campaign of ethnic cleansing](#) in northern Gaza, 2.3 million Palestinians concentrated in the center and southern parts of the Strip are desperately trying to survive the harsh winter in makeshift shelters and tents.

In December and January, average low temperatures in Gaza can drop to as low as 9 degrees Celsius (45 degrees Fahrenheit), accompanied by strong winds and heavy rains. In these conditions, Palestinian parents are in a constant state of anxiety about losing their children to winter illnesses and hypothermia.

In addition to Juma'a Al-Batran, at least [five newborns](#) and infants have reportedly died this winter from the extreme cold, according to Dr. Ahmed Al-Farra, head of pediatrics and obstetrics at Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis: Seela Al-Faseeh, 14 days old; Youssef Kloub, 35 days old; Aisha Al-Qassas, 21 days old; 'Ali Saqr, 23 days old; and 'Ali Azzam, 4 days old. In addition, two adults have died from exposure: Ahmad Al-Zaharneh, 33, who worked as a nurse at the European Hospital in Khan Yunis, and Afaf Al-Khatib, 55, who suffered from chronic illness. All of the victims died in tents on the beach, either in [Al-Mawasi](#) or Deir Al-Balah.

Palestinians stand inside their flooded family tent, in a displacement camp in Khan Yunis, Gaza Strip, December 31, 2024. (Doaa Albaz/Activestills)

Jagan Chapagain, the secretary-general of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, underscored the danger posed to Palestinian children living in Gaza's tent encampments during winter without proper shelter or food. "I urgently reiterate my call to grant safe and unhindered access to humanitarians to let them provide life-saving assistance," he wrote in [a statement](#) on Jan. 8. "Without safe access, children will freeze to death, and without safe access, families will starve."

His alarm was echoed by Dr. Al-Farra: "The situation in the tents is catastrophic," he told +972. "There is no means of heating and protection from the cold in light of the lack of electricity, fuel, and gas." Even using scrap materials to start a fire can be extremely dangerous: the tents are flammable and the smoke, ashes, and debris can exacerbate respiratory illnesses.

While children of all ages are vulnerable to hypothermia, it is premature newborns who are most at risk. "We had large numbers of [premature infants] born during the war," Al-Farra said. "[That is] due to the malnutrition of mothers and the severe lack of vitamins and nutrients." Premature infants cannot properly regulate their body temperature and thus require incubators and respirators — of which there is only one in the Nasser Hospital nursery.

In one particularly disturbing though not uncommon case, Al-Farra encountered a mother and her malnourished six-month-old child, who weighed less than eight pounds. As it turned out, the baby's mother had not eaten in three days; her previous meal was a can of peas that she had split with her family. "That is why she did not have enough milk to breastfeed her child and protect him from hypothermia," Al-Farra recounted.

The rise in hypothermia cases comes as the children's department at Nasser Hospital already faces collapse, treating upward of five times as many patients as average with regular cases of hepatitis, intestinal infections, pneumonia, and skin diseases.

Palestinian families bid farewell to their loved ones at the Nasser Medical Complex in Gaza's Khan Younis, after Israeli forces bombed several areas the night before, January 4, 2025. (Doaa Albaz/Activestills)

But beyond the physical toll of this work, Al-Farra stressed that doctors in Gaza also grapple with a psychological burden as a result of the violence Israel has unleashed on their colleagues, most notably the recent arrest of [Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya](#) of Kamal Adwan, and the torture and killing of [Dr. Adnan Al-Bursh](#) by Israeli authorities in [Ofer prison](#) earlier last year.

"Doctors are living in a war zone just like the rest of the people in Gaza," Al-Farra affirmed. "The doctor treats patients, but their thoughts are also with their families in the tent, wondering whether or not they have food — and whether they are safe or [exposed to bombing](#)."

'I do what I can as a mother to warm my children'

The death of Seela Al-Faseeh on Christmas Day — just 14 days after she was born — sent shockwaves through the Al-Mawasi tent camp, which has become home to many infants under six months. Samar Al-Ras, a 40-year-old mother of five, could hear the cries of Seela's mother from a nearby tent.

"She woke up screaming in the middle of the night that she could not warm her daughter, and camp residents helped [by bringing] her blankets," Al-Ras recalled. "But in the morning, we woke up to her screaming that [the baby] had died."

Al-Ras and her family have been living in a tent in Al-Mawasi since the beginning of the war, after being displaced from their home in Khan Younis. This winter, she told +972, was even harsher than the last. With the tents' condition deteriorating, they are less capable of trapping heat and withstanding the rain.

"We can hardly warm ourselves — we don't have enough blankets," she told +972. "Nothing separates us from the surrounding environment except for some fabrics and nylon. Sleeping in the tent is as if we were sleeping on the street."

A Palestinian woman runs with her child in the rain in a displacement camp in Khan Yunis, Gaza Strip, December 31, 2024. (Doaa Albaz/Activestills)

Al-Ras explained that the sea air is particularly cold at night. "My children come to my lap and ask me to cover them more. Sometimes I have to tell them to put on more layers of clothing or a jacket to make them a little warmer. [Their] bodies are unable to bear this severe cold."

On sunny days, Al-Ras tells her children to sit outside all day long "so that their bodies warm up and store heat, so the night will be less cold for them," she said, adding that she tries to put them to bed as early as possible before the temperatures drop. But despite her best efforts, all of Al-Ras's

children, as well as her elderly mother, are currently ill with coughs and the flu. “I do what I can as a mother to warm my children and protect them from the cold. I [can only] hope that this war will end.”

A cycle of displacement

Before the war, 59-year-old Maryam Abu Lahia used to love the winter, praying for the rain “to cleanse the air of diseases and water the crops.” But now, rather than hoping for rain, “whenever I see a cloud in the sky, I pray that it moves north and doesn’t stay here,” she told +972. “We do not have the means, shelter, clothes, or blankets [to deal with the cold and the rain].”

Abu Lahia and her six children have been displaced five times since the beginning of the war. Originally from Bani Suhaila, east of Khan Younis, she and her family evacuated to Rafah in October 2023, where they stayed until May 2024. After returning home, the family was displaced several more times, finally finding themselves back in a tent in Al-Mawasi. “We never felt comfortable due to the repeated displacements,” she said grimly.

Palestinian children stand in the mud, in front of their family tent in a displacement camp in Khan Younis, Gaza Strip, December 31, 2024. (Doaa Albaz/Activestills)

Last winter, Abu Lahia and her family did not even have mattresses, and were forced to sleep on the ground in their tents. But even the mattresses they were able to eventually secure are of little consolation in piercing winter cold. “There is no money to buy wood to warm ourselves, and there is no water,” she said. “I hold my children in my lap and cover them with my blanket, but it does not protect us from the cold.”

Like Al-Ras, Abu Lahia acknowledged that she and her children gain some warmth during the day from the sun, but at night the situation is dire, forcing her to compromise her own health for the sake of her children. “Previously, I gave my own blanket to my son, and then I got sick for two months.”

But while she and her family continue to suffer, Abu Lahia is still sensitive to the plight of those around her. “My neighbor has eight children and her husband is a martyr,” she noted. “She has a very bad mattress and no one looks at her with humanity.”

Now, she pleads for aid organizations to do whatever possible to help those languishing in makeshift tents survive the winter — before it is too late. “[Humanitarian] institutions should provide blankets for people now,” she affirmed, “instead of asking how to help only after someone loses their child.”

Ruwaida Kamal Amer

P.S.

- +972. January 9, 2025:
<https://www.972mag.com/newborns-freeze-to-death-in-gaza-tents/>

Ruwaida Kamal Amer is a freelance journalist from Khan Younis.

- Our team [+972] has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war – the atrocities

committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment – but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

[BECOME A +972 MEMBER TODAY](#)