

Huge Craters, Dead Children, Collapsed Homes: In Southern Gaza, There's Nowhere to Flee

Thursday 7 December 2023, by [HASS Amira](#) (Date first published: 6 December 2023).

The resumption of bombing is pushing Gazans further south towards Rafah, where a million displaced persons live in unbearably crowded conditions. People are fighting each other for insufficient supplies of food and water while the police try to maintain a modicum of order

The nonstop bombing and shelling that began last Friday morning together with orders by the military have been driving Gazans southward to Rafah on the Egyptian border. They are also moving a little further to the west, to the Khan Yunis beachfront, even though residents say that Israeli warships have been shelling the city from the sea.

The Al-Jazeera news network provides a steady stream of images [testifying to the destruction in Jabalya](#), which suffered its second bombing in two days, in the refugee neighborhood of Sheikh Radwan, in the Shujaiyeh neighborhood, [in the new town of Hamad north of Khan Yunis and in Khan Yunis itself](#).

'Now, those who fled from Gaza [City] to Khan Yunis are coming to Rafah, and there's no place to house them.'

Palestinians fleeing Khan Yunis arrive in Rafah further south near the Gaza Strip's border with Egypt on December 5, 2023. Credit: SAID KHATIB - AFP

It is hard to [keep track of all the places where bombing has been reported](#). It is very likely, as this article is being written, December 3, that another place was bombed and will soon be producing new images of giant craters surrounded by people who can't believe their eyes.

The screen keeps showing dust clouds rising from which a child suddenly emerges screaming and bleeding, apartment buildings that have crashed down to their foundations and crowds of men in flip-flops and T-shirts trying to rescue someone from the concrete and iron mass.

[There are the wounded scattered on Salah al-Din Road](#) after they were hit by tank fire, then the hospitals with the bleeding wounded and the dead on the floor, the stretchers carrying small bodies, the beds with dismembered children crying or in shock.

Palestinian civilians flee Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip after the Israeli army called on people to leave certain areas in the city, on December 3, 2023. Credit: MAHMUD HAMS - AFP

When Jabalya was bombed on Saturday, Nora wrote me to say how close she had been to it and that 'they are throwing smoke grenades at us so that we'll leave - but no one intends to leave.'

Palestinians stand on the edge of a crater after an Israeli strike in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on December 3, 2023. Credit: SAID KHATIB - AFP

[The death toll reported by the Hamas-controlled Gaza Health Ministry continues to rise.](#) Israelis don't believe them, but they also don't watch Al-Jazeera or other broadcasts. To chronically watch these reports creates an illusion of closeness and involvement, and arouses a contradictory feeling of complete paralysis in the face of the carnage. Verbal descriptions are a poor substitute.

Here and there, one sees a report of clashes between Hamas fighters and IDF troops. But Hamas' bragging about some Israeli APC being hit or rockets being fired into Gush Dan has nothing to do with the craters in the heart of neighborhoods whose residents were killed and where the facades of the apartment buildings were sheared off.

[The evacuation orders arrive via fliers dropped by war planes](#), recorded announcements interrupting radio broadcasts and social media messages delivered by the IDF spokesman in Arabic that reach people only during the rare moments there is internet.

Israeli flares light the sky above Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, on December 3, 2023. Credit: SAID KHATIB - AFP

Palestinian civilians flee Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip after the Israeli army called on people to leave certain areas in the city, on December 3, 2023. Credit: MAHMUD HAMS - AFP

On Friday, my friend Nora wrote me that the army was ordering everybody to evacuate to the south. She and her spouse had been forced to leave their home in Beit Hanoun for the Jabalya refugee camp, at the beginning of the war. The fighting and the bombing followed them to the camp. Nora's partner preferred to wait another day, saying they would flee west and south by way of the beachfront. On Saturday, they had second thoughts about it and decided to stay. They had heard that people were being shot along the route they planned to take and that some areas were being bombed.

When Jabalya was bombed on Saturday, Nora wrote me to say how close she had been to it and that

“they [the army] are throwing smoke grenades at us so that we’ll leave - but no one intends to leave.” No one is forcing them to stay, but taking the road south scares them more than remaining in the bombed-out camp. Nora sent a photograph of herself on a donkey cart looking for food. She also sent a picture of her oldest son and grandchildren in Berlin. She said her daughter fled to Deir al-Balah and “already regrets it,” mainly due to the insufferable crowding at the school building that had been turned into a shelter and the humiliation of living with thousands of others without a bathroom, electricity, running water or barely any food.

Palestinians mourn the death of loved ones following Israeli bombardment in the southern Gaza Strip on December 5, 2023, outside a hospital in Khan Yunis. Credit: MAHMUD HAMS - AFP

I haven’t heard from Nora or from her daughter since Jabalya was bombarded a second time on Sunday. I prefer to think that it was because there’s no internet.

On Sunday afternoon, an acquaintance of mine told a mutual friend that she and all of her family were leaving Khan Yunis and moving south. She runs a feminist center in the city that at the start of the war provided shelter for 600 displaced people. Deliveries of aid amounted to 50 meals per day, to be split among them all.

What will happen to those 600 people? Will they be evacuated a second time to Rafah? The entire Rafah District is 63 square kilometers. Before the war, about 280,000 people lived there. The average population density there was among the lowest in the enclave, at 4,182 people per square kilometer. According to the United Nations, as of last Friday the number of displaced people living there had reached approximately one million. That figure probably includes Rafah residents who fled from the east, or whose houses were damaged by bombings of nearby homes.

“Now, those who fled from Gaza [City] to Khan Yunis are coming to Rafah, and there’s no place to house them,” said Maher, who has been displaced twice, first from Gaza City to his wife’s family home in Rafah, and then, after the house next door was bombed, they moved to his brother’s home in another neighborhood after the house next door was bombed. “We’re lucky,” he said, because they’re living in a private home and not in a shelter with masses of people.

Palestinians check the damages after an Israeli strike in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on December 3, 2023. Credit: SAID KHATIB - AFP

How many people are crowded into the Rafah District today? How many people does the IDF think it can cram into it? Maybe 1,100,000? Or 1,300,000? At one million, the population density is 15,873 people per square kilometer; if it becomes 1.3 million, it will reach 20,634. “Sardines,” someone wrote to an old Israeli friend who lives in Tel Aviv. Sardines without water or food.

“For the first time in my life I signed up to get flour, and I felt shame,” Maher said. He has also registered as a displaced person at UNRWA’s distribution center in order to receive a food package. Twice a week, those on the list get something like a package with two cans of tuna and two cans of peas. As we spoke, booms were audible - cannon shells from the east.

Also, strange bursts of gunfire were heard. It turns out the Palestinian police (who report to Hamas) have been deployed at assistance distribution centers because people are fighting over food. There isn’t enough for everyone. The police are trying to maintain a semblance of order and punish storeowners who gouge customers by ordering their shops closed for a day or two.

On Sunday, Israel bombed a house 500 meters from Maher. Three residents were killed. Maher only thought to tell me after I asked. To live 300 or even 100 meters from a bombed house is today considered safe. “But we’re all scared,” he added. “Don’t conclude from my calm voice that I’m not.”

Amira Hass

P.S.

- Haaretz. Dec 6, 2023 12:22 pm IST:
<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2023-12-06/ty-article-magazine/.premium/huge-craters-dead-children-collapsed-homes-in-southern-gaza-theres-nowhere-to-flee/0000018c-3e77-d8ec-a79c-ffff72000000>