

Tuesday's Child Blog

Tuesday's Child Returns to Gaza – Day 1

Monday 6th July 2009

It is 5.a.m. and I am looking forward to my return to Gaza. My lift outside is bang on time, and we drive through the early Jerusalem. It is quite a beautiful morning, the sun is rising casting an orange glow and I wonder, as we leave the Old City with its majestic buildings, if this is what it was like on the morning of the Resurrection; probably not as hot, this is July, not Easter and there has been a lot of global warming since.

The team meet in Ain Karem, the village of the Visitation, and we climb into the large car, creaking with aid. I am glad we packed it yesterday. There are 6 of us, three from our partner group, Sr Susan, Fr Don and Br Andres, me and two visiting priests making their first visit – Fr Avram and Fr Thomas. We drive out of this little village towards Erez with Br Andres at the wheel. We are a multi-national group, one Italian, one Irish, 3 American and 1 German. My prayer is that Gaza will have its freedom soon.

An hour or so later, Erez, the northern border of Gaza approaches. A tightness grips me as the sheer grimness of this huge security area, that borders the tiny strip of 25 miles behind it and imprisons 1.5 million people, looms ahead. A formidable, cold, grey steel mass, that looks more like a processing factory than a border. We reach the Erez terminal at 7.30 a.m local time and cross into Gaza at 9.30 a.m.



Fr Avram, Br Andres, Fr Thomas, Fr Don outside passport control at Erez

I am delighted to cross through so quickly with all of my supplies from Belfast including 100 musical instruments, food supplements for children, colouring books and crayons, school supplies, treats and lots of toys. It is a great feeling to walk into Gaza after the huge disappointment of the Rafah

border in February. We go through 3 sets of gates as in my first visit last year and then we are met at an inner gate by Palestinian men with very welcome large trolleys.



Fr Don and Fr Avram in the Erez crossing

I can see our aid co-ordinator, Sabah, ahead waving at us from the Palestinian border and I fill up at the joy of seeing her again. I am so very proud of her for the work she and her team have done through the most painful time of the history of this tiny strip of land. Despite dangers during the war, she and her team, brought food parcels and water to families stranded in their own homes. I throw down my rucksack and bags and run over and embrace her, hugging this precious lady tightly. God only knows what she has endured. The joy of our meeting annihilates the sheer destruction on either side of the road and for a moment I cannot find the words. Thank God she is alive and well.

Our first stop is a new innovation since my last visit, a Hamas checkpoint that proves longer and more thorough than the preceding Israeli affair, followed by second new innovation, a health assessment, which really boils down to asking for whereabouts while in Gaza and contact details and plan of visit, after which I am asked if I have any flu-like symptoms, coughing or sneezing. A short time later, our aid co-ordinator is called in and asked if she is really a Muslim and why she is collaborating with Christians. Most likely, because we feed all people in Gaza, not just Hamas voters, I think to myself. And then they delay our busy schedule by reading some of the children's story books for the summer camps. For apart from me, everyone else will leave Gaza today and I know this futile delay will limit the time they have.



Happy meeting with Sabah, our food distribution co-ordinator in Gaza

We drive through Northern Gaza and the devastation envelops us. The destruction is worse than I ever imagined. I think back to the TV pictures in December of hundreds of tanks traversing this same terrain and the terror they rained.

Our first stop, just 5 minutes from the border, is a summer camp the Daughters of Charity are supporting. The children seem to be everywhere and I dig out my pick and mix, purchased in the Via Dolorosa; it disappears to great excitement and delight all round. The children have just had their breakfast of pitta breads and fruit juice. The teachers show us around and all the children are having a good time. Save The Children are also helping with this summer camp. Across the hallway, they unlock a door, and the chilling reality hits home again as I survey the gaping hole in the wall and the huge damage to this classroom by a rocket attack. And Israel say this was not a war on civilians. Again, with all things, there are no materials or means of fixing this shark bite in the wall. Many of these children lost brothers, sisters, parents, cousins and school friends for Northern Gaza sustained by far the greatest injuries in the war.



Summer camp for children, Northern Gaza



Classroom damaged by rocket attack

We say good-bye to the children and travel through Beit Lahya, This area is grim and everywhere, utter devastation interspersed with people trying to rebuild lives in make shift homes, some tents, some corrugated iron, some shacks covered with blankets. Buildings teeter as if they are about to collapse. Just last week 5 people in this area killed when they returned to their home to clean up the devastation; the roof caved in on top of them. Operation Cast Lead is still claiming lives. Makeshift stone ovens sit along the side of the streets, to bake bread through the heat of the sun, in the absence of both gas and electricity and I marvel, not for the first time, at the resourcefulness of the people. Others sit around fires, toasting bits of bread on long sticks.



Makeshift home in Beit Lahya

We stop at one of the many random camps and children soon come to the car to greet us. The pick and mix goes well here and there is great excitement. The people look dishevelled and I notice one mother and child, both of whom, have extreme trauma written all over them and dirty tear tracks run down a very hungry little face, burnt and sore from the sun. I ask this woman how she is and she says that while she has lost her home and the little she owned, she is glad to be alive, although life is very hard, we are hungry and living in the tents for so long is difficult.

All around, there are scenes of basic survival, people here have made homes

wherever they can. An estimated 58,000 homes were destroyed here during the war and before that 5000 homes in 2008 in house demolitions. With an average of 10 people per household, that is 630,000 people displaced, over 25 percent of the population here.



Mother and child living in tent since January



Makeshift home



Child carries water and food to his home

We drive on to another summer camp in Beth Lahyia area, scenes of mass destruction on either side. Sabah chose this area for a summer camp as there is nothing for children in this area. Here, children are playing ball and chasing games and happy faces beam at us. Others I note are playing tug-of-war and I reflect on the irony of it. Fr Don is quick to join in the fun and this 80 yr old Jesuit is pretty agile for his years. A group of kids are playing basketball, however they are using plastic dust-bins at low level for baskets. I show them a few tips and use the space in the high girthing above us as a makeshift hoop and kids line up to take shots and practice their technique. I never thought the first thing I would do entering Gaza was give a basketball lesson and I make a point of trying to source proper nets later in the week. We take photos and the children squeal with delight at seeing their faces on the digital camera and I am inundated with requests for more photos.



Daughters of charity summer camp – Beit Lahyia

Other children join in sack races and three-legged races, old games that give fun and cost little. All around happy glowing smiling faces. God only knows what these same children lived through. Many are still very afraid, explains one team leader here, but their time here at the summer camp is happy and fun-filled. They wish the summer camps could last all year.

We have a lot to do and it is time to move on. We drive through more

destruction and past the American school, that stands in a teetering mess of rubble and twisted metal. This school, focal point to 500 of Gaza's brightest children, and total aid investment of 5 billion dollars to build, completely destroyed. What bravery it must require to bomb a children's school into oblivion.



The American School in Gaza where 500 children 6-12 yrs attended



Burnt out shells of school buses for the American school

Alongside it, 5 school buses lie as burnt out shells. I think of the human right of children to travel safely to school and the work done in other countries to promote safe school transport. I flashback to my childhood and my favourite auntie manouvering the burning buses on the Falls Road in Belfast. While many draw the analogy of the troubles in Northern Ireland to the occupation of Gaza, what these people have had to endure is on a different scale altogether. At least, we could leave, go to Donegal in the summer time, stay somewhere safe. The Gazan people were trapped, they had, and have, nowhere to go to and no place was safe. People fled to UN schools, locations given to Israel, not to be harmed, and these were bombed too.

Outside the American school, a car pulls up and it is Fowzia who works with Sabah in the food distribution programme. Fowzia, a wonderful woman with a big heart and huge compassion who, like Sabah, has worked tirelessly for her people. The heat is searing and we drive on to what is left of Fowzia's home to cool off and have some water. When Israel invaded Gaza, Fowzia's

home was one of the first to be possessed. At least 20 Israeli soldiers moved in as the family evacuated in only the clothes they were wearing. Israeli soldiers destroyed everything in their home including their much loved dog, that they had no time to take, shot through the head. And inside, everything is smashed. All the chairs had large holes cut in them and left so as they could not be used. There are chairs like this now all over Gaza. I wonder is this what Israel pay its army do? Kill family pets and cut up chairs and if the Israeli tax-payers are aware of this.



Fowzia, aid volunteer, and her husband

We sit and talk of many families, many friends and the brutality of the systematic and indiscriminate killings with no regard for civilian safety. In one area, 50 people from one extended family, rounded up and put in a large room and killed one by one in front of each other. The youngest baby was with another woman looking after him that morning; the soldiers came, found the infant and shot it in the head, then threw the baby's body on the pile of other bodies. Over the coming days, many dogs and other animals gathered in this area and ate the corpses. The Red Cross, particularly concerned about this area, tried to access it many times but could not get through Israeli checkpoints.



Chairs in homes left like this

It is amazing, given the sheer artillery that entered this strip of land that more than the 1400 people who lost their lives weren't killed. Enough warpower invaded to destroy a continent. These are only the official numbers, I am told.

Many more are unaccounted for. The death toll is much higher than published figures.

In the forecourt here, we sort the schools supplies Sr Susan has brought for the various schools and we give the money for the next food distribution. Sr Susan, has helped people in Gaza over the last 14 yrs, travelling in on a regular basis from Ain Karem. Sr Susan, is also a Sheehan, we are not related although we share the same ancestral home of North Cork. The monthly food distribution now costs Tuesday's Child, £11,000 stg a month for 300 families and just under 2000 people. It is great to hand the 132,000 shekels for food over in person. This is for food for July and August and I give thanks to the Irish music stars who performed in our gig for Gaza and made the extended feeding programme possible. I also carry donations of a further 70,000 shekels with me in cash to distribute according to need. Money belts here are not safe and so the cash is secreted in a large box of tampax, always a useful decoy when your bag is checked.

Time now for the rest of the party to return to Erez and cross back and we say our good-byes. I will miss everyone and the camaradie of this group. It is a pity they cannot stay for a few days even.

I travel on with our team to source accommodation as my planned address for the 14 days has fallen through. Our first stop is a hotel, often used by NGOs and journalists, however they have a large delegation just arrived from France, and so there is no room at the inn. We settle for a hotel on the beach and I learn I am their only guest for the night. The only guest in 150 rooms which just about sums up the damage of the blockade to tourism in Gaza. Many hotels like this lie empty. Many others damaged beyond repair.

I check in, shower and change and arrange to meet up with Sabah later. There is no air conditioning and the heat is stifling. However, at least I have hot water, a proper bed and a flushing toilet which is more than can be said for almost all people in Gaza tonight.

Sabah and her husband, Nazem, call for me and we drive to their home and meet their 4 children, two of whom, I have met before. Four lovely children, who have never been able to travel outside of Gaza; their world consists of 25 miles of occupation and blockade and the daily persecution that goes with the territory.



Sr Susan Sheehan, Daughter of Charity with Fowzia's 8 month old grandson, Odia

We sit and they talk of the war, and the sheer trauma that shook this 25 mile stretch of land for almost as many days and I listen. The sheer fear and terror experienced by this family comes to life as they show me where they sat, on the floor, in the most secure part of their apartment, afraid to move, with no food and only a little water for days. *"Sometimes, we shuffled into the kitchen area for a change of scene, however, we were almost afraid to move. So many people died in Gaza if they moved, even a small distance"*, explains Nazem, *"husbands were killed beside wives, and wives beside husbands. When we did venture to the windows, the sky was black with F16s and apache helicopters (I wince as I think that the warheads for these are manufactured in Co. Kerry) and from the coastline the endless shelling from Israeli war boats. It was coming at us from the air and the sea. And it was freezing as we had to keep the windows open completely for flying glass also killed and injured many. The sound was deafening. Our building is high, we could see everything and hear the cries and screams and the smell, the smell was the worst, the smell of blood mixed with rotting flesh and pungent smells of shells. All of Gaza cried in pain and it was as if, up here, we could hear every cry and scream"*. And yet, still, in all of this Sabah left her home to distribute food parcels. Incredible bravery. The families in this apartment block thought, given its height and view over Gaza city, it would be occupied by Israeli soldiers as a perfect killing position. They all agreed together they would die rather than let their homes be used as killing zones.

I return to my hotel at 1 a.m. Everything is in darkness as there are no street lights and not a car on the road, apart from ours. Just as I am walking up the

large staircase everything pitches into darkness. I can see nothing, I cannot go forward or back, so I crouch and put my bum on a stair, relieved I had found one and also that this hotel has no lift. The staff shout up power cut as it is routine, well it probably is, and I wonder how I will make it up the next 6 flights to my room. Eureka, the torch on my mobile. I take it out and the charge has gone. I sit for some time and then, eventually there is light. The staff shout up the generator has kicked in and I make for my room. Just as I approach, it goes again and pitch black again as and I fumble for the lock, everything is in complete blackness, not darkness, just black. I finally get in, feel my way along the walls, then the bed and the phone. I lift it to ring reception and it's dead. Pitch black, no phone, no mobile... let's hope Hamas don't come calling now. I lie on top of the bed and all the images of today run through my mind.

I think of all the families who were holed up in similar blackness during the war and their fear with the sounds of death all around. The rockets, the shelling, the bombardment from land, air and sea, facing machine guns at close range, beatings and the horror of white phosphorus. Seeing houses bombed and loved ones killed and burned. Parents lifting blackened bodies of children out of the ground and body parts everywhere with the rancid smell of rotting flesh. It all seems more horrific in the dark. I try and focus on the busy day ahead and our itinerary for tomorrow and then the light comes on. I lift my prayer book of inspirations and I open it at "*be courageous and strong*" and I think how silly I am to fear the dark, for I usually have no fear of anything. I charge my phone and make a mental note to buy some matches for my travel candle. I open another book of inspirations from Directions for Our Times and the words are "*Be at peace, now, my little one. I am holding you tightly*". The message brings great comfort, for it is in His name, we work. My head hits the pillow and with the visions of the day still flashing through my mind, I fall asleep.

If you are in a position to help any of the families we met during our time in Gaza, please contact us at info@tuesdayschild.co.uk or [donate online](#)

[Continues to Day 2 »](#)

Tuesday's Child Blog

Tuesday's Child Returns to Gaza – Day 2

Tuesday 7th July 2009

We set off today at 9 a.m. Our first stop is to a confectioner to buy sweets for children. The choice is much more limited here than in the Arab quarter of Israel but important to support local businesses and they are very glad for the custom. We make up 4 large bags of pick and mix before setting off to Northern Gaza. We have selected 10 families from this area (area 1 of the food distribution programme), 9 at random and one by request, the family of Dima, the little girl I met in Cairo in February, who died from her injuries in March. The heat is already a blistering 41 degrees.

Our first stop is with 3 families in Beit Lahya. The first of these a Bedouin family, Mesleh Farahan, living in very poor conditions, with 7 children including 2 babies to feed. We listen to their story, they give thanks that they are all alive and the food they receive from the programme. The only source of dried milk is via the tunnels and it is expensive at 26 shekels a tin, so two hungry babies eat considerably into the family allocation of 200 shekels per month. We give them money for milk and fruit for the year and the mother of the family weeps with gratitude. I think of the waste at home and the things we buy that we don't need and it is very humbling. The Farahan family were previously living in the middle area Deil Belah and their home was demolished before the war. They moved to Northern Gaza as they have relatives in this area. As with many families in Gaza, it is wave of trauma after trauma and I wonder how they can keep going.



Mesleh Farahan, Beth Lahya

The second family here in Beit Lahya is Ahmed El Atar who lost their home in the war. We walk upstairs to a small area of three rooms, the main area with a couch at one end. On it sits the father of the family, Ahmed, and I can immediately see he has no legs. He introduces me to his wife and 5 children

and after introductions I sit on the mattress beside him and listen to his story. Pain and despair are etched into this young man's face, as he tells his story and it is clearly emotionally difficult for him to talk about it. He looks very much older than his 28 years. *"I was visiting my brother to see how he was doing and to ask him to come to our home to stay with us and I heard the attack. It was crazy, there was noise of shelling all around and fighter planes were buzzing overhead. I was worried for my family so I sprinted back across the fields towards our home. One of the tanks spotted me and chased me and started firing. They hit me and cut me and that is the last thing I remember. My next memory is waking up in hospital and both my legs were gone. I spent a month in hospital in Turkey. The same day as I was wounded, we lost our home and my eldest son lost the sight in his right eye"*. Ahmed lifts his sarong and shows me both of his stumps. I notice how high both amputations are, each to above the upper thigh. I sit with him as his children each come over to him to play. He thanks us for the feeding programme, it is one less worry for him that there is some food each month for his family on a regular basis. I ask about artificial limbs, he said he is waiting to be fitted with these. We give him money towards the family needs for the coming year and we leave him playing with his youngest child. Gaza has many amputees like Ahmed, this is just one of hundreds of similar stories. Who will help to rehabilitate Ahmed? There are no community care services in Gaza. Who will help him explain this war to his children?



Ahmed El Atar family, Beth Layhia

Outside, the area of Beth Lahyia is almost obliterated. The living conditions are almost impossible, made worse by limited electricity, no running water and lack of refrigeration. There seem to be children everywhere. Two young women sit in a makeshift shack. As there is no electricity here, they are baking bread in a clay oven; the bread is for the whole neighbourhood. Despite the surrounding chaos, they seem in good spirits and are enjoying baking in the outdoors. They offer me some bread to taste. Children help the women bring cardboard to keep the oven alight. The community spirit is strong, people here, young and old, muck in and help each other out in the daily game of survival.



Two young women baking bread for neighbourhood in homemade clay oven

About 500 yards along, we stop with a third family. Again, both parents are in their late twenties with 5 children. We fed this family before the war as their home was demolished in 2007 and they had no means of income or support. We continue to do so as they have been badly affected by the war. Again, we are introduced and I sit to listen to their story, as the children politely help themselves to the sweets. Their father, Hassan, was lifted by Israeli soldiers and struck on the head, he fell and that is the last he can remember. Others saw his body lifted and thrown on the side of the street with many other bodies. Some time passed, he is not sure if it was hours or days, and he regained consciousness. He wakened and he describes the scene, *“all around me there were dead bodies, covered in flies and the smell of rotting flesh and dogs eating the arms and legs and heads of the dead bodies. A woman noticed I was moving and called for help and an ambulance came and took me to hospital”*. He has not slept well since and was later transferred to a psychiatric hospital where he spent some weeks. He continues to have the same recurring nightmare.

Hasaan has since been diagnosed with schizophrenia. His wife shows me the hospital letter, the diagnosis and the medicines she now has to give him. While, everything is in Arabic, medical conditions and medicine names are standard around the world so it easy to understand the condition and the three tablets he is taking. The last house the father had gross physical trauma and now in this home, mental trauma. I know that post traumatic stress can trigger acute mental illness, however I was not aware schizophrenia was one of these. We leave extra money for food for the year with the mother. I ask if there is anything else she needs. She shows me the fingers and toes of her baby eaten by mice and the bite marks. I notice, as I look on the sleeping child, that she has rickets. I give her 3 months of food supplements for each of her children and explain to her how to give them. Human beings should not have to suffer like this.



Young boy helps gather cardboard for the outdoor bread oven



Family Hasaan El Icalann



Hassan El Iealann with wife and 4 of his 5 children*



Baby Iealann asleep in the family bedroom, rickets evident in her left leg

We drive to visit our next family and just when I thought it could not get any worse, this family of 17 lost 8 people in one assault. I speak to two of the surviving sons. The house is still charred, all black on the walls. They have since painted two of the walls with white paint procured through the tunnels. As many families did, they were huddled in what is considered the safest part of the home at the end of the upstairs corridor. A white phosphorus bomb came through the roof of the home, just above where the family was gathered. The mother was breastfeeding her baby at the time. The son remembers everyone screaming and burning and the child's screams from the white phosphorus the loudest. Six of the family burned to death and 2 cousins also killed. The mother survived and is in a psychiatric hospital; she also has burns to her arms, face and chest. Inside in the bedroom wall, Israeli soldiers have drawn a Star of David and slogans celebrating so many deaths in one hit. And Israel say this is not a war against civilians.

Unlike, most families in Gaza, this family had some money and a relatively comfortable standard of living before December 2008. Operation Cast Lead shattered their lives. In addition to the murder of half of their family, they lost everything they owned and why they were prioritised for aid in February. The family had no political involvement. He shows me the spot where the family were killed and where the white phosphorus bomb came through the roof, it landed directly on top of them, as if the bomb pin-pointed the family. Shoes

and charred possessions still lie in the corridor.

As I stand in the spot where these 8 people died, the sheer horror of this war hits hard and looking at the faces of the dead in the poster on the wall, including the 8 month baby girl, it begs the question why? Tears trickle down my cheeks and I break Palestinian custom and embrace these two young men who are openly weeping. It really doesn't get any worse than this and I wonder how they will manage to grow older without holding hatred towards those who committed this atrocity.



Picture of Sadall Abo Hallaema family members who died in white phosphorus bomb of home



Corridor where 8 of the Sadall Abo Hallaema family were killed by phosphorus bomb

We move on to visit our next family, that of Said El Rahel. I met Siad in the

Palestinian hospital in Cairo in February 2009. His 5 yr old daughter Dima, was in ICU there with a severe head injury from which she died a few weeks after our visit, the 313th child reported to die as a result of Operation Cast Lead. We included Siad, his wife and 6 remaining children to our feeding programme. The El Rahel family welcome us warmly and we give out, colouring pencils, toys and sweets to Dima's brothers and sisters. Dima's older sister who is 7yrs old, shows me the scars on her head after being hit in an air strike of one of the UN schools on 6th January 2009. She explains she still gets bad headaches and cannot remember things at times. Dima's mother thanks us for the food and gives me a school picture of Dima. Her father, an onion farmer before the blockade, takes us upstairs to show the house next door where she was hit and points to where he found her some 30 metres away bleeding profusely with her brain exposed. *"It was the two most terrible days of my life, two daughters badly injured within 24 hrs. I will never forget it. We all feel Dima's loss greatly, what did my little daughter do to be killed like this? All the children are still very frightened, they are very nervous, the least noise and they jump. It is the same for all of us"* says Siad.



Dima's family

There is a huge focus on education of children here in Gaza and yet failure rates in examinations have been high these last two years. However, it is difficult to learn when you are hungry and children throughout Gaza have found it particularly difficult to concentrate on studying long before this latest war. I ask the El Rahel children about school and if they like it and how they are doing. They tell me they love going to school and one by one they show me their school reports. I take photos and tell them I will send copies for them to put on the wall of their home. The children queue up to show me their school reports and grades.



Dima's brother Said, with his school report*

We say good-bye to the El Rahel family and drive to Jabalyia refugee camp, more like a city than a camp with some 200,000 inhabitants. It is over-run by children and donkeys, hence it's often known as the "city of the child and donkey" and one can see why many of both were killed here during the war.

Our first stop here is with the Fathia Abed Rabo family, whom we have been feeding since November 2007 and whom we met in August 2008, on our first visit to the strip. They also featured in the film we made last year. It is great to see them all alive. Fathia proudly shows me her wheelchair supplied by the Daughters of Charity. They explain they evacuated to one of the UN schools when the war started, they left everything. The greatest challenge was moving their grandmother in the shelling. They thank God that they are alive. As with all families, we leave money for their needs and they are delighted.

We have to move on as we have many families to visit. The next is the Hathem Mohra family, also in Jablayia, a family of 7 children. This family are new to the programme, joining it post-war. Hathem was lifted by Israeli troops and badly beaten. He is still suffers from severe pain in his back and leg and is unable to lift anything, even the children. As with most of our families, the living spaces are cramped and basic.



Fathia Abed family, Jabalyia

The living area is basically a yard with small outhouses of it. I ask how long the food lasts and they say about 10 days. It is not enough and seems to be the average duration for every family. However, these items cost an equivalent of £32 per month and this is difficult enough to raise at home in the current economic climate. Mrs Mohra explains that she is expecting another baby so soon there will be another mouth to feed and, as on many occasions today, she weeps when I give her money for her family to help with the months ahead. Their gratitude is deeply humbling.

En route to the next home visit we stop at the supermarket in Jabalyia. I am keen to meet with the shopkeeper and see what families are getting currently for their monthly food coupon compared to this time last year. Also to see where exactly food is currently sourced post-war.

While the food shops in each area are called supermarkets, they are really small grocery stores, with not unreasonable stock now, although many were empty during the war as all trucks into Gaza were refused for 2 months previous to it. The shop-assistant prepares a common monthly choice for a food coupon, based on necessity, not luxury. This comes to 214 shekels and they usually give 10 - 15 shekels discount. Families can choose items up to the coupon equivalent; the little choice gives dignity and we prefer this to standard food parcels.

It is disappointing to note however that families are getting less per 200 shekel coupon than this time last year, but with internal prices rocketing, that is to be expected. Still, they are getting more than I thought possible and we estimate the drop in supplies is about 10 percent, 20 shekels.



Hathem Mohra family, Jabalyia



Food allowance for 200 shekel coupon as chosen by family

A typical family choice for a monthly coupon would be as follows: butter 1 kg, olive oil 1L, sunflower oil 4L, lentils 1kg, beans 2kg, chickpeas 1 kg, rice 2kg, pasta 1kg, sugar 3 kg, tuna 2 tins, beef meat 4 tins, cheese 500 g, cheese triangles 4 packets, kidney beans 4 tins, stock cubes 5 boxes, tomato paste 250g x 2, salad dressing, coffee 250g, tea 500 g, yeast 1 packet, soap 10 bars. Bread is not usually taken as it is cheaper to make than buy and most people will try and make their own bread wherever possible. Cigarettes and other sundries are not permitted. Other families will buy sacks of flour or formula milk for babies.

Food supplies into the supermarket come from: Egypt, West Bank, Israel and also via the tunnels. The food from Israel is very limited in choice and currently with a cutback in aid by over 80 percent, people in Gaza could not survive without the tunnels. I ask what different the tunnels make. *“There are over 1400 tunnels into Gaza from Egypt”*, says Ahmed, our driver, *“if it was not for the tunnels we would die”*. I buy some cans of 7UP for the team as it is very hot. I wonder are they in date as they are dented and dirty, with grains of dirt over them. And then I realise, these have come from the tunnels, the dirt is sand and I will discover, many items for sale in Gaza, are covered in the tunnel grit. We will visit the tunnels next week.

I am approached by a man in the supermarket by the name of Sami. He is

fluent in English and intimates that he is in partnership with the owner. He speaks at length of the food supplies and sources, and regular purchases of families. He seems very knowledgeable, affable and helpful. He offers his email and asks me for my contact details, email and phone number and I give him these. He even stops in the door of the supermarket to have his photograph taken. Later in the afternoon, I am told that Sami is not bonafide and represents an ugly and seedy undercurrent in Gaza, only out for their own gain. I think the observation a little paranoid until later tonight when I receive 3 texts and 3 voicemails from him.

It is now 4 p.m and we drive on to visit the next family chosen at random to visit. This family also live in Jabalyia and have been part of our feeding programme since November 2007. Their father has cancer and the growth in this 31 yr old man's face and it is clearly evident when he greets us. Yousif El Jarjeet is a father of 7 children and his sister also lives with him and his family. He explains the horrors of the war and the fear for their safety as they remained cocooned in their homes for days with no food and little water. *"We stayed in this section of the house, for 15 days continuously"*, he explains, *"without food, light, anything and the bombs continued to fall. I didn't attend throughout the war for my chemotherapy, it was too dangerous"*. He explains how the monthly food coupon has kept his family going even though it doesn't last for more than 2 weeks but that is good to be able to rely on the core supply every month. Again, we give them enough money to help over the next 6 months and they are overjoyed.

Just a short drive away we meet our next family, the Jomah family, mother of 8 and a baby on the way. To fathom where they are living is hard to describe. It is not a house, but the end of an entry, over the front of which they have run a curtain across. The first thing that hits you walking behind the curtain is a mountain of washing drying on washing lines that criss cross the whole area. Mrs Jomah shows us the damage to her "home" from the war. Like many, while still traumatised, they are just glad to be alive. She says the food we give lasts anything between 10 and 14 days; we give her money for more food for the months ahead and her eldest daughter is ecstatic, jumping up and down and clapping her hands. As with all families, they kindly offer us tea, but we have a busy schedule so decline. Mrs Jomah asks me if we can help with a doctor for her child's right foot; this is a chronic muscle defect, congenital and probably correctable by surgery and I make a note to see if we can arrange a referral to a paediatrician. The Jomah family wave goodbye. Again, I could not live in such conditions and I admire their ability to.



Yousif El Jarjeet family



Jamal Jomah family



Jomah family, wave good-bye, their living area in the background



Doorway in Jabalyia



Another doorway in Jabalyia

Jabalyia, apart from being the most densely populated region, is undoubtedly the most colourful area in Gaza. Every doorway however tells a story, often one of human suffering, and yet the people here are trying to get on with things although many say they don't have the heart and their spirit is broken. As we drive along and take pictures of street scenes, I wonder what story lies behind each doorway? I notice one little boy, sitting alone and just contemplating. He is the first child in Jabalyia I have seen wearing a pair of shoes. How did so many manage during the war with white phosphorus falling everywhere, in their bare feet? It is also the first time I have come across a child alone in Jabalyia as the law of the street here is that no child walks alone. I would like to hear more from the children and their experiences, but at the same time, one does not want to bring them back to the most horrific of nightmares from which they are trying to recover.



Little boy alone in Jabalyia, with shoes!

Time to leave Jabalyia and drive North to make our last home visit of the day, to Beit Hanoun. As we drive across the area the smell of raw sewage is rancid, combined with the over 40 degree heat, overwhelming.

The family here are the Sharfa-El-Massrey family with 11 children. They live in a narrow house no bigger than the back yard of an average terrace house at home. Mrs Sharfa El-Massrey shows me the damage from the bombings and the holes in the ceilings and roof. Her husband speaks of the war and the sheer terror of it, explaining the family are all still very stressed and tearful. For a month after the war, they could not sleep, they were too afraid to sleep as many neighbours died in their beds.



Sharfa El-Masrey family, Beit Hanoun

I ask how long the food coupon lasts and they say about 12 days. I give Sharfa money to support the family and she is thrilled. You would think this warm and friendly woman had just won the lotto! I notice the washing on the line and ask her how she manages to wash so many clothes for 13 people. She shows me her hands and laughing says they are ruined. I ask her if she has a washing machine. She says no but it would be like heaven to have a washing machine to use between the electricity curfews. It would also give her more time with the children. I promise her a washing machine, if we can source one, before I leave Gaza. We leave a very happy woman with just some of her burdens eased for now. Later she phones our aid co-ordinator, still ecstatic. She has never had this amount of money in her life before, yet we have given her 1000 shekels, about 250 dollars or 175 stg. I have spent more in a shopping afternoon and it underlines how uneven the world is between East and West.

Time to return to the hotel now and I look forward to a shower, another luxury here, which we take for granted at home.

It is 2 a.m. now and I am still writing about today. From starting at 8.30 p.m to now there have been 6 power failures. I find this, being used to light and air-conditioning at the flick of a switch, very frustrating. Time for bed and, as I pray to my guardian angel, I reflect on the day and all the families and broken lives I met and I think of the many dead and badly injured. Where were all of their guardian angels? Working overtime I decide. For it is clear today from the damage and mass obliteration of Beit Lahyia, Jabalyia and Beit Hanoun that this war could have killed thousands upon thousands of people. It is a miracle that the death toll was not much higher. I open the volume from direction for our times and read "*All children of the earth, hear My call. You have sampled the world's offerings and you have been left*

unloved and in darkness. I offer you all that is light and good. I offer you safety and confidence. I will nourish you in times of hunger and console you in sadness". As I switch off the light, I ask Him to send me more money to help with the hunger and bring His healing balm all those suffering across Gaza tonight. Most of all, to bring an end to this most cruel blockade.

If you are in a position to help any of the families we met during our time in Gaza, please contact us at info@tuesdayschild.co.uk or [donate online](#)

[Continues to Day 3 »](#)

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Tuesday's Child Blog

Tuesday's Child Returns to Gaza – Day 3

Wednesday 8th July 2009

This morning I meet with 3 brothers from the Abu Eida company for concrete and construction materials. This company was one of the largest businesses in Gaza before the war and also a main employer. Operation Cast Lead changed all that. The small industrial area in Northern Gaza was completely obliterated. *"We lost everything"*, explains Mohammed Abu Eida, *"factories, homes, agricultural land, vehicles. Thankfully none of our employees were killed. The first attack happened at the busiest time of the day for Gaza, people were working and children were just about to leave school, it was chaos"*. I ask where they were when the war started. *"We were here in this office, all of us, in a meeting. The whole building started trembling violently like an earthquake and then the bombs started falling, they were endless. We ran outside and the sky was black with fighter planes and helicopters and there was intensive shelling from the sea, it was coming from all directions and it was terrifying. There was thick black smoke everywhere and it was difficult to breathe, everyone was coughing and the noise was deafening. Our children were at school, but there was no mobile network. It is impossible to describe, there were 120 air attacks from air and sea in the first 5 minutes. My heart was beating so fast and it was impossible to think what or where to go first. It felt like Armageddon, the end of the world. We got into our cars and drove home to see if our children were there, and then onto schools, with people being killed around us. It was terrible as children were all in different schools"*.



Mohammed Abu Eida, Abu Eida Concrete and Construction Company

I ask if any of their families were hurt. *"We all survived, thank God, but some of our children are extremely traumatised. They still cannot take it in"*. Mohammed's eldest son who is 17 yrs old is still in shock and it is clear to see. *"We had a good standard of living for Gaza and they have lost everything, their home gone and they find the transition to a small apartment*

difficult". I think back to when I was 17 when my father was made redundant. We had to leave our lovely home and it was a traumatic time. I missed my lovely room and nice things and the gardens and the large kitchen most of all and well just everything. Yet my parents turned the rambling home into a business while we moved into cramped rented accommodation. Yes, a traumatic time, without a full scale war, bombing of our home into oblivion and the death of 1400 people including school friends.

I ask about damage and prospects for recovery and I am given a poster that shows picture after picture of complete desolation. The family company lost 7 factories, 3 homes and 2 fruit tree plantations. Saddest of all, the sheer loss of life of people who made what living they could in this area. "*Our father built this company up over many years and we, his sons, continued it. He died three years ago and I am glad he is not here for this*", offers an older brother.

Many people come and go to this office this morning and it is clear that Mohammed and his brothers are held in high regard. Mohammed is impeccable, mannered, informed, fluent in English and very kind about my attempts at basic words in Arabic (I am learning 10 new words and phrases a day). He and his brothers have gone from being one of the wealthiest families in Gaza to being in the same boat as everyone else, yet they are determined to start again and this is an inspiration to many. It is a huge setback for all of us, but we did it once, and with the help of God, we will start again. I speak with his other brothers and they tell me they are already starting. A representative from the UN visited the area last week, he shows me the representative's card, I don't recognise the name but he seems important. He said he had no words just tears and he shed many. They ask me to come and see their recovery work later in the week. I admire their resolve and spirit in the face of such adversity. At least, however, unlike many, they are here to tell their story.

I return to Sabah's house for lunch with her and her children. They speak again of the war and it is clear it is never far from their minds. I listen. I check my email and there is one from Ireland's Amnesty group flagging a TV3 programme by Vincent Browne last night in Dublin on Gaza. We sit around my laptop and try to download it but, with the internet connection so poor here, we only get the link in a few sentences at a time, so it is a tedious process, like many things in Gaza. A representative from the Israeli embassy in Dublin, is speaking. He says quite calmly "*there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza*". Hello?! Are you living on the same planet as everyone else? How can people holding such positions of office lie so blatantly? And on the subject of cement and building materials, he offers "*we cannot send cement and building materials into Gaza because Hamas would use it to build tunnels*". I roar laughing at this point, it is the first good laugh I have had since my arrival and I needed it. There are 2,200 tunnels in Gaza, 1400 hundred of them active and not one of them is built with cement. What point is there in discussion forums and dialogue if people are going to go onto national television and discuss such an important issue without truth. And then another beauty from another twat, whose name I didn't catch "*the Gaza strip is not obliterated*". Fair play to the Aidan O'Loughlin, the Irish journalist on the panel, he underpins lie after lie and concisely so. We switch off, we have heard enough and I regret recommending that we watch it.

We head out to buy more sweets for children and to do some filming. I ask Sabah's son Mohammed to join us. He came with us yesterday, to visit the families in Beth Lathia and Jabalyia and he enjoyed his new role in helping with the coverage. I tell him he would make a great cameraman and he smiles. It is important to give as much encouragement as possible and always to speak of the future in hopeful terms. I approached a number of press photographers before my trip to travel with me, but no one wanted to know and another wasted much too much of my time. Indeed, on several occasions, some told me I was crazy to go to Gaza. However, there is nothing to fear

here now, apart from the inability of these people, to recover from this atrocity. I did manage to find a kindred spirit in Maeve who had no qualms in coming along as photographer and said yes immediately, however we couldn't get clearance for her in time for this trip. Maeve is from Portstewart and has gone on location with third world charities on a voluntary basis and works at The Big Wheel in Belfast. Thanks for being up for it Maeve! Next time!

We drive to the industrial area to follow-up on this morning's thread. The smell is nauseating and I cover my nose and mouth. *"It's from carcasses of many dead animals, this was the main agricultural area"*, our driver Ahmed explains. In some areas it is impossible to breathe and I am retching, the smell is foul and intense. *"This is nothing, when we first came here a few days after the war, there was no road, streets could not be identified, bodies of workers here lay everywhere rotting in the heat, among them many dead animals, cows, goats, chickens and sheep. We had to wear masks and scarves over our faces and there were still fires burning from the white phosphorus. Really, it was like a scene from the worst horror movie"*. I ask if all the dead bodies have been removed and am told yes, that the Red Cross cleared the area, although it is thought some still lie unclaimed under the rubble or burned to ash in the intense white phosphorus fires here. I can only imagine the suffering that happened and tears roll freely down my cheeks as I survey the mess.

We drive on and the destruction defies belief. I take endless photos, each one worse than the previous. We pass what was a huge barn for keeping cattle, now a blackened shell. *"As the cows ran out of the burning buildings"*, explains Ahmed, *"Israeli forces shot them one by one, laughing and enjoying their game. Whole fields of cows lay dead here, all around, they lay sprawled and bleeding"*. I picture the scene and wince for I love animals and I don't want to hear anymore. Even as it is, the state of the hundreds of donkeys in Gaza, is terrible. My friends here often comment on my love of donkeys and joke that I should open a donkey sanctuary in Gaza. Joking apart, animal rights movements would have a field day in Gaza. However, people here can hardly feed and water themselves, let alone their donkeys.



One of the many factory shells in the industrial area



Remnants of another factory



Remains of cattle barn where many cows were shot as they ran from the blaze

“And they shot all the animals in the zoo too”, Ahmed says. *“Yes, I read about the zoo”*, I tell him, *“I would like to visit there”*. My mind wanders back to many happy days visiting Dublin zoo with my Mum and brothers and sisters when my Dad was horseracing and having a flutter on a donkey or two of his own. While, Ireland had many raw years of occupation, British forces never came into a zoo and shot all animals dead. OK, yes they had bigger fish to fry like Croke Park 90 yrs ago, but a zoo? What kind of mind would even think of it?

Expanding on the zoo subject, Ahmed asks me if I heard about the lion. *“The lion”*, I ask? *“Yes the lion they brought through the tunnels for the zoo”*. I laugh at him suggesting he is pulling my leg, but he explains, *“Many people in Gaza were very upset about the zoo and some tried to replace the animals, through the tunnels, but there was a bit of a problem with the lion”*. I tell him I have heard of a lion in a wardrobe but never a tunnel; however CS Lewis hasn't reached Gaza and he doesn't understand; it is too difficult to explain without bringing a witch into it and so I ask him to tell me about the lion. *“Well, it came via Egypt and it was drugged there and brought through in one of the small cars they use in the tunnels, but they didn't give it enough drug and when it was coming out of the shaft of the tunnel, he wakened and killed his handler and injured a second man”*. Unbelievable story, however in this instance my sympathy is with the lion. I tell him if someone anaesthetised me, dropped me into a tunnel, then into a car for a 2000 metre drive and then up

the same height on a winch, I would be pretty angry too. It seems you can bring anything in via a tunnel, for a price. Gaza is a crazy place. I ask if he will take me to visit the tunnels and we agree to go to Rafah on Tuesday.

I am glad of the lion diversion as it takes my mind off the misery here. I ask Ahmed to put his foot down as I can't take the smell. About 500 yards on, we meet bits and pieces of self-made houses and families wave as we drive by. I can't believe how anyone can possibly still live here in the smell and the squalor. "*This is where their homes were*", explains Ahmed, "*and they want to stay near to home*". Still this is horrific. As we drive past, children wave through windows and I want to stop and meet them, but Ahmed decides no. "*Another time*", he says, and we drive on as I click away. One strikes me in particular, it is half home, half tent and has a huge Palestinian flag and looks as if it could fall at any minute for the rubble pile it is built on looks like it could cave in any minute.



Family living near the industrial area

There are many more makeshift homes in this stretch. I simply could not live like this. I would like to stop and knock and say hello, meet these people and listen to their stories. I will return!

As we drive, I reflect on a statement from an interview with John Ging at the end of April stating "*the people of Gaza continue to subsist in the rubble of their former lives and the attention of the world has sadly moved on, which compounds their despair*". This sums it up exactly, accurate, concise and to the point. While many wax lyrical on Obama's speech in Cairo, I prefer the Ging approach as he calls a spade a spade and hits the nail on the head without all the flower arranging. Indeed, when it comes to Gaza, he is the nutshell king. I thought his answer to the night electricity curfews published in one of the Sunday papers at home at the end of January was par excellence "*Cutting of power affects mothers, not militants. Militants operate very well in the dark, but mothers don't*" and one that stands out in my mind particularly. It just hits the message home. I can see why the people of Gaza I have met say they would like him for President, for he has taken these people to his heart, has the courage to call it as it is while at the same time refusing to tolerate rocket attacks on Israel.



Makeshift home in the rubble



Another makeshift home

The following pictures show just some of the damage to just a few of the hundreds of homes destroyed by Operation Cast Lead in this area.



Bombed home near the industrial area



Another home destroyed, one of thousands across Gaza



Area where apartment block fell

A little further on we come to one of the many batches of relief camps. In the adjacent plot of land a new cemetery opened during the war, where many of the dead from this area are buried.



Temporary accommodation in relief tents



Relief tents overlooking new cemetery opened during war

Time now to visit more of the families we support through the feeding programme; we drive back to meet up with Sabah and Fowzia. We have 5 families to visit this evening. We go via my hotel to pick up more sweets and also food supplements for children, as every house we visit, we bring both as well as toys. The continual supply of sweets is now nicknamed the sweet factory by Sabah and Ahmed. The toy factory is bigger again. Little treats and toys are very important and the little gifts make little faces light up.



Tuesday's Child's "sweet factory"

The first family, this afternoon, Moherub Hwuayhi, lives close to The American School. A family of 5 children with another baby on the way. Their's is a nice home with a garden, but ruined and shot to pieces. They joined the feeding programme after the war. I ask Mrs Hwuayhi, how her pregnancy is going. She says it is fine, but she is very tired. I ask if she is taking iron and she says no. I ask how long the food lasts the family and she says between 10-14 days. Anaemia in pregnancy here is very common, estimated at 80 percent at cases. Routine iron supplementation in the second trimester is really needed in Gaza, as is pre-conceptual folic acid and also for the first trimester.

We drive to the second family of Sharf Sobh in Beth Lahyia. There are 6 children here and the youngest baby born after the death of his father in the war. The mother has been unwell and in hospital and has returned to her own family with her children. I am also introduced to her grandmother. Again, as with every family we leave some money for their needs. This money is hugely

welcomed in every household and so desperately needed. I wish we had more to give each home.



Baby Sobh, 4 months old, father killed in January '09



Main living area of family Basel Sobh



Grandmother Sobh

We drive on to another family badly affected by the war. In this house three brothers lived with their mother, all of them with wives and children. All three brothers died in an F16 attack. We meet the Basel Sobh family of 6 first of all, who lived in the bottom floor of the home. Basel explains that her husband was killed when their home collapsed, he was in bed at the time. She brings me into her home and shows the huge window through which the rubble crashed that killed her husband. Behind the checked curtain the window space is packed solid with rubble restrained with whatever the family have found to keep of it from pouring in. The restrained rubble fills the large window space blocking out all light into the home. I can't believe it has not been cleared, it is dangerous to leave it like this.



Rubble from F16 attack that killed three brothers in Sobh family home

Basel introduces us to her 5 children, and tells us the food lasts about 14 days. She is 7 months pregnant, another child in Gaza that will never know its father.



Basel Sobh with her 5 children

Upstairs we visit her sister-in-law, Rezaqm and her 8 children, standing in what was their former home. Here the two outside walls and the roof have gone completely and she points to show where her husband died.



Rezaq Sobh, mother of 7 children in living room of her former home



Rubble that killed Rezaq's husband

It is just one heartbreaking story after another. As we move on, I am acutely aware of the sheer trauma and shattered lives we are leaving behind.



Basel and Rezaq's mother-in-law her lost 3 sons in the one attack

Our next stop is back in Jablayia. We drive through a maze of streets to meet the Siad Eade family. It is too narrow to drive here so we leave the car and walk. There are so many children here and we give out lollipops and sweets as we go along. The word soon spreads on the street and we are surrounded. When we arrive at the family home there must be fifty children behind us all delighted with the treats and hoping for more. Almost every child here is in the bare feet. Supply of shoes for children in Jabalyia, I will add it to the list!



Children of Jabalyia



Children of Jabalyia



Children of Jabalyia



Sweets disappear rapidly in Jabalyia

We finally reach the Eade family at the end of a long street, there are over 20 in this family and they have been part of the feeding programme from the beginning.



The Said Eade Family

It is getting quite dark now so we have to call it a day. We return to the car followed by many children, however we are out of sweets for now. Ahmed doesn't like driving in the narrow streets here in Jablayia with so many children. As we drive off, they still follow the car smiling, waving and still hopeful for more sweets.

We say goodnight to Sabah and Fowzia and drive into Gaza city, stopping to replenish the sweet factory again. We shop quickly for it is late. I notice some lion bars and buy some. In the car, I hand one to Ahmed and he roars laughing; we are still getting mileage out of the lion and the tunnel tale.

I change hotels tonight getting to my new address about 11 p.m. I look forward to a shower but there is no water, nothing. Someone comes up to bleed the taps and still no water. Again, the things we take for granted. This is nothing, many of the families I met today have no water for up to a week at a time. And then a large cockroach pops out to say hello and runs across the

bathroom floor. I squeal, much to the amusement of the kindly porter come plumber. I surmise what he is probably thinking - it is only a cockroach not an Israeli soldier! At least there is light in this hotel, I couldn't bear cockroaches in the dark. The heat is stifling and no air-conditioning here. I am moved to another room about 1 a.m. some water, albeit cold, at last and I am very grateful for it. The hotel is too small for me and the cockroach family, however, and one of us will have to go. I will check out tomorrow!

I reflect on the day and where other people are sleeping tonight. I lift volume one of Direction For Our Times (www.directionforourtimes.com) and after a short prayer open it at a page 158 that says "*Children, it is not I who has brought darkness over this world. There is enough food in the world. Medical care, also, can be spread around in a more effective manner. Humanitarian assistance to your poor and less advanced societies is an act of mercy and those who practice it are following My will whether they know it or not...I need leaders now. I need every single one of you to turn your faces to heaven and agree to serve me. The darkness has lost its time now and I will have the world my way. You must see that this happens in your corner*". I thank Him for putting me on this path for it is the most important of work and I consider it is a privilege to be able to help those in need, even in little ways. I just wish I had found it sooner and not wasted so much time chasing twists and turns in what I thought was my vocational career, for in the greater scheme of things, such achievement is not important and, in truth, I was chartering a very shallow course.

If you are in a position to help any of the families we met during our time in Gaza, please contact us at info@tuesdayschild.co.uk or [donate online](#)

[Continues to Day 4 »](#)

Tuesday's Child Blog

Tuesday's Child Returns to Gaza – Day 4

Thursday 9th July 2009

I waken at 6 a.m this morning with severe diarrhoea. It would seem that despite being careful and even having my alco-gel hand wash with me, I have succumbed. I reflect on what I have taken to eat or drink the previous day and cannot source the culprit. I drank a litre of local bottled water last night and I wonder if it is contaminated? I am lucky that I have access to a bathroom, and as a pharmacist, know how to look after myself. I think of the many children and elderly, who have no adequate bathroom facilities and wonder how they cope.

UNWRA have kindly arranged a full day itinerary for me to include visits to their food distribution centre, remedial education programme, health clinics, strawberry growing programme, a women's community centre and the summer games. Saskia Marsh, specialist assistant the Director, picks me and Sabah up outside the hotel at 8.15 a.m. As with all UNRWA staff they have a driver and the vehicle is armoured for security reasons.



UNRWA pick up 8.15 a.m.

As we drive along I say my morning offering in the back of the car for I have not had a chance to pray this morning. I think back to my childhood and my father driving us to primary school each morning and in later years to grammar school and always starting with the same prayers – a prayer for protection and the morning offering for the day. A man of faith, truth and justice – a true gael. And my beautiful mother, who often lead the rosary in the car on longer trips. How fortunate we are to be blessed with wonderful parents to shape us, for children live what they learn from an early age. While they are both passed now, some 12 and 14 yrs, respectively, they are with me wherever I go and just picturing them, even for a moment, gives me peace, deep joy and love.



Our first stop is to one of the schools in the UNRWA summer learning programme. Summer Learning is part of UNRWA'S Schools of Excellence Initiative to arrest and reverse the decline in the quality and uptake of education in Gaza. Over the past 2 years, end of year exam failure rates here have approached 35% and parents are shocked in the decline in education as Gaza has always been proud of the standard of education here. Reasons for the high failure rates include: class size, an average of 41 and the impact of the siege and ongoing incursions. The full impact of Operation Cast Lead on school performance here is still to be realised.

The Summer Learning programme focuses on teaching of Arabic and Mathematics for all children, approximately, 45000, failing both subjects. The programme includes 1500 UNRWA teachers and class size is limited to a maximum of 25.



Boys in the UNRWA Summer Learning Programme

We are introduced to the Head Teacher here and we visit 6 of the classrooms. We have our supply of sweets with us and they go down a treat. The majority of children here say they prefer learning in the summer programme as: the classrooms are not as crowded, they have more individual tuition from the teacher, they are all working at the same level. Classes start at 7 a.m. to have minimal disruption to the day and attendance is almost 100 percent, incentivised by a meal at a school, provision of stationery to all children and awards to pupils, teachers and schools, for the top performing and most improved in an Awards Ceremony. A key incentive, explains the head teacher, is John Ging himself. "*All the children know John and he tells them that a good education is each child's individual responsibility; no-one can do it for them, they must take ownership of their own future*", he explains. The programme clearly works with a success rate of 81 percent in 2008. I am told later that the programme is called "*Summer Learning*", in response to the Israeli ground operations of 2006 that claimed lives of main children, their so-called "*Summer Rain*". Clever!



Saskia with pupils and teachers from the UNRWA Summer Learning Programme

I ask as I do with every group of children I meet in a learning environment, to each give me three things they are brilliant at. It often evokes surprised faces as children are often more used to being put down and criticised. The boys in the classes laugh and we have a range of answers – english, art, football, summer games and now of-course Arabic and mathematics, reflective of how this programme gives all important confidence in abilities. I offer that we can be good at a lot of things, not just in academic subjects, for example, sports, trades such as joinery and plumbing, helping out at home and being a good friend.

I also ask what they would like to be when they grow up and there are a whole range of high aspirations – doctors, engineers, scientists, lawyers, professional footballers. Great to hear so many dreams of a future in the wake of such suffering.

We wish them good luck and I say a prayer for all of them that God may protect them, help and support them through the injustices of daily life in Gaza. Most of all, that they continue to have hope for their future.

We return to the school office with the head teacher and some of the other staff for coffee. I accept but cannot drink the stuff here; it makes Turkish coffee seem extra mild. The team here are clearly motivated in their work and determined that all the children will pass their exams later this summer. Stuck to the top of the table a laminated picture of John Ging, the Head Teacher and former US President Jimmy Carter, who visited the strip last month. Quite a coup and I must remember to congratulate John Ging on it when I meet him next week.

Looking to education initiatives generally, UNRWA provided education to 200,000 refugee children in 6 elementary and 3 preparatory years. Non-refugee children attend Palestinian authority schools. Given the sheer numbers of children in Gaza, education is delivered via 221 schools in 124 buildings via double shifting, where one school will attend in the morning and another in the afternoon. Times are 7 a.m to 11.30 a.m and 11.45 a.m to 4.15 p.m. Operation Cast Lead hit at 11.30 a.m, the time clearly chosen to have the maximum impact on schoolchildren here – those leaving their school day and those starting their school day.

UNRWA has a 12 point action plan to promote Schools of Excellence generally. The plan is one of vision including the hope to recruit 1650 support

teachers, build a teacher training college (no materials currently), improve school governance and a new programme for 2009 for special needs education. Currently, construction and repair of schools damaged by the war is a priority, again pending access for building materials, still not possible here 7 months on.

Central to the education programme is human rights education and an awareness of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in an attempt to promote a greater understanding of dignity and justice for all and to help these children recover from the violence perpetrated on them with future regard for the rights of others.

Our next stop is UNRWA's food distribution programme, based in Jabalyia, serving 750,000 refugees here, half of the Gazan population. As we drive in, we pass the shell of a building immediately adjacent to it. I wonder is this the UNRWA food store that was hit in the last days of the war?



Shell of a building beside the UNRWA food distribution centre

We meet Mohammed, the manager of the food distribution to 750,000 people, quite a responsibility. Food distribution here is on a 60 day cycle and divided into key stages. Each family has an identity card and a full record of what has been issued. There are 6 core items provided here including flower, rice and cooking oil. Food provided by UNRWA gives an estimated 60 percent of calorific needs.



UNRWA food distribution centre in Jabalyia



People waiting to have their coupons processed by the administration office

Each family has a food allocation book and people come to the window with their requests. The office is very busy here and there are many outside waiting for food. Requisitions are given to men who work to and from the store area and then bring food to another area where people collect their allocation.



Food requisitions are taken from the central office to the store



Mohammed with employees who fill food requisitions in the UNRWA food store



UNRWA food allocation on the way home to one family

In addition to food, UNRWA supply blankets and mattresses. I note their quality and I wish I had some like these for the families we help; these were donated from Japan.



UNRWA blankets and mattresses

In the donkey and cart park, some are there selling their goods to people coming and going for food and great to see that this is possible. UNRWA's flexibility is commendable.

In addition to food assistance, UNRWA's emergency programme includes support with delivery of critical water and sanitation services, shelter reconstruction for families whose homes were damaged in the war (although no building materials can access the strip as yet), cash assistance to help with purchase of house supplies and rental subsidies for the displaced. Also, a job creation programme employing 10,000 refugees and I will see more of this later.

We leave the busy food distribution centre and drive a short distance to visit a UNRWA community centre for women, also in Jabalyia. This is one of 18 centres providing community outreach to women, officially known as "*Equality in Action*" programme. The initiative is designed to improve the capacity of Palestinian girls and women to exercise freedom of choice, take advantage of opportunities for personal and professional development and to address inequality at all levels of social, economic and political life. This programme meets with considerable resistance and so no better woman to co-ordinate it than Layla, a very vibrant and enthusiastic lady who does not take no for an answer. Resistance to innovation and change is a universal problem.



Layla, co-ordinator of UNRWA's community outreach for women with Saskia, UNRWA specialist assistant to the director

The community centre here gives space for local women to come and interact socially. They offer skills training, counselling and recreation e.g. films, library and encourage film and book review. They address important issues such as domestic violence and under-age marriage. The goals are: to empower women, to cultivate the right to freedom of opinion and self-expression and to seek and to receive and impart information and ideas through media, one of the articles of the Universal Declaration. Their current project is hoping to implement a radio station for women across the Gaza strip, again hampered by considerable resistance and lip service only, however if anyone can make it happen, Layla can!

There are a group of women from Jabalyia here today watching a film and discussing the issues it raises. We are invited to join them and I ask how the community centre and the services here have changed their lives. The answers give huge insight into the success and importance of the UNRWA Equality in Action programme: it gives us a chance to meet and make friends, we feel more informed, it is a break from the home for much needed me time, I am more confident in communicating, I am more confident in discussing difficult issues, I feel I am a better mother now in that I communicate with my children more effectively, I find it easier to parent my children and deal with difficulties at home and last but not least, I can escape from my mother-in-law for a few hours, to which everyone agrees in applause. Mother-in-laws, another universal problem. I ask if their husbands are happy that they come here and the general consensus is no, they don't approve of it but they come anyway...the empowerment is clearly working. The women sing some songs and a special song matrimonial song for Saskia and then the party starts! One young woman sings solo and her voice is quite stunning; it could make millions. Maybe the X factor will come to Gaza. I will write to Simon Cowell!



Women in the community centre watching and reviewing a film

It is great to see these women coming together and enjoying themselves and forging new friendships. There is great community spirit among them and it is wonderful that they have this facility particularly in light of all they have suffered, not only from the recent war, but their long history of dealing with incursions, occupation and the hardship it has brought. It is, in these 4 days, the most uplifting experience since my arrival. I ask Layla what the most common requests for services from the centre are; counselling, support and help with stress management are the most common requests. UNRWA's Equality in Action is clearly also Healing in Action and Human Development in Action.



Saskia joins in the dancing with women in the community centre in an impromptu boogie

We say good-bye and move on to visit an agricultural programme – the UNRWA funded strawberry fields. This programme is part of UNRWA's job creation scheme and is just one example of assistance given to the agricultural and fishing sectors. Here the strawberry programme gives employment to formerly unemployed farmers and agricultural workers who can earn 40 shekels per day here. The fields were destroyed during the war, but recent growth is flourishing. The manager here is very informed, and he has many

needs for his anticipated crop this year including nylon and most of all for the borders to open for export and if they are to make any money. I ask what the difference is in price - 2 shekels per punnet locally whereas he could get 15 shekels in Israel. Still, it's good that the local community will benefit from the fruit for they don't get nearly enough here. He is very proud of the small industry and acknowledges John Ging for making it possible for them. As with everyone we meet, they speak of John in high esteem and it is clear he is a man of vision and action.

UNRWA job creation programme assists a variety of sustainable small and large-scale labour intensive projects. Such projects include building irrigation systems, rehabilitating greenhouses, preparing, planting and harvesting a variety of crops and preparing fishing nets. Job creation programme employees also provide vital assistance in delivery of public health services and provision of sanitation services in refugee camps.



Strawberry fields showing decimated in the war, now showing new growth



Manager of the UNRWA funded strawberry project and some workers who benefit

The heat is searing now and the gastroenteritis is really cooking up as the vomiting kicks in. I have to walk away from the strawberry programme presentation and miss much of the statistics and what he has to say. I am embarrassed and apologise as it is clearly vital work of which he has much more to share. It can't be very encouraging to have a foreigner visit your work only to throw up in the field opposite. I offer to come back to meet him another day. We return to the UNRWA offices and meet some of the other staff here, Johanna, Suzanne, Blake and Claire – a great team and clearly very committed to what they do. I have to call it a day now as really quite sick and they kindly take me back to my "hotel" with only half of their comprehensive itinerary completed, stopping en route for soft drinks as again only the same contaminated water available.

I am too ill to move hotels and spend the rest of the day between the bathroom and the bed. The diarrhoea is vile and now unchecked by anti-diarrhoeal medicine. It is infective so I stop the tablets in the hope that it will run its course. I am quite dehydrated but do not want to risk the water again, so open cans of coke and 7 UP and leave them to sit and drink flat soft drinks, although I could murder a bottle of Evian as my tongue feels like sandpaper I am so dry. I sleep for some hours and waken from a bad dream in which I am in the strawberry fields and can't go forward or back as I am surrounded by cockroaches!

Sabah phones to see how I am and, as many times, asks me kindly to come and stay with her. I promise to do so on my next visit, for she, as many here,

is tired and needs her space and rest. I lift my little volume again and open at random: *“My children, I am with you...today, I want you to both hear these words and understand them. I am with you. Does that mean I watch you from heaven hoping all goes well with you? Does it mean I gaze out over my whole world, seeing only the large events? No, I am with you my child. That means I see the world from your eyes, I am there when you are hurt. I feel the sting of human unkindness when you experience it. I feel the weakness and pain in your body, when you are sick. My compassionate gaze, so filled with love and understanding, rests upon your every minute of the day. I forgive any sins even before they are committed. But you must admit your sin and ask for forgiveness. My child do not think you have been abandoned, I say with divine solemnity, I am with you”*. As I read over these words again, I realise they are not only for me, but for Gaza, for this little 25 mile strip of land, bullied by the great powers of the world, is almost child-like. Given that, He is here, I ask Him, to bring an end to this cruel blockade for these people have suffered too much. For with Him, all things are possible.

If you are in a position to help any of the families we met during our time in Gaza, please contact us at info@tuesdayschild.co.uk or [donate online](#)

[Continues to Day 5 »](#)

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Tuesday's Child Blog

Tuesday's Child Returns to Gaza – Day 5

Friday 10th July 2009

Ahmed collects me at 10.30 a.m. and we go to look for another hotel. It is very good of him as today is his day off when people stay at home with their families. He explains he goes to the mosque at 12 to pray so we have until then. He is a very good person, with a “*white heart*” as they say here in Gaza. Everywhere Ahmed goes, his prayer mat goes with him and often when we are doing our outreach visits, I notice him quietly in one area praying. The Muslim people here have great faith in God and the Islam principles of love, peace and harmony are evident in the majority. Why Cat Stevens converted and is now Yusef Islam! I have always loved Cat Stevens and was very grateful for the prizes he donated for our auction at the music concerts for Gaza in Dublin. The picture, often painted by the media, of a violence-orientated community is grossly misplaced for the majority are a peace loving people.

Gaza is not that dissimilar to our own situation over the years of violence in Northern Ireland, where peace was hi-jacked by the selfish and narrow views of two minorities with the long sickened civilian majority suffering the greatest losses. While Hamas may have been democratically elected in 2005, this was a response from the people to their disillusionment with the corruption of Fatah. The persecution of their own people here is evident daily. It is tragic to hear that the local punishment tactics of knee capping that shattered too many legs in the province has now become enshrined in standard Hamas protocol here in Gaza...different bucket, same shit.

The Palestinian people in Gaza have never been more divided and in this Israel have achieved their aim. Without unity between the Palestinian factions here there is no hope for a future for Gaza. Without it, the humanitarian situation will not improve nor will the blockade end. For some, the continued blockade is welcome, for an elect few are making millions from the tunnel business. Yet, speaking to the young people, they want unity between the two communities for truly it is their only hope.

The first hotel we try is one that some of the large NGOs use here and so we call to check availability and price. While both lovely and recommended, I cannot condone the 115 USD tariff per night, equivalent to 400 shekels that would feed a lot of people for one month, so we move on. Tuesday's Child does not take expenses or travel costs, no costs, or salaries even, and it is a requirement of our work that we continue in this ethos. I have issue with the percentages some organisations take in the name of charity. Hotel bills, at such high rates, in my book, is an inappropriate use of public monies.

We go to a second hotel, recommended by Saskia and bargain them down to half the price of the former. Regardless, the cost will not come out of the Tuesday's Child pot for Gaza. I ask to see the room and it is clean and airy and I think it is the best deal I will get in Gaza. We return to The Cockroach Palace to collect my bags and check out. If anyone is looking for me, they will have difficulty, as this will be the third move in 5 days; my needs for



cleanliness and security are covering my track well.

It is now 11.45 a.m. and we stop to re-stock the sweet factory. Ahmed seems to be enjoying his role of sweet dispenser and I christen him Santa Claus! I ask him to cover his large service taxi with ribbons and ballons and go through Jabalyia giving toys and sweets; he laughs and says we would get killed – mobbed by children! Secretly, though, I know the child in him is up for it. He leaves me off at Sabah's home and goes on to the mosque to pray to his beloved God. I will leave it a few days and try again.

I spend the afternoon with Sabah and her family. Her husband, a fine man of principle and integrity is also getting ready to go to his local mosque to pray. The violence of Operation Cast Lead and the loss of civilian life in Gaza has done nothing to weaken the faith of these people. I tell him, as he leaves for the mosque, that he looks regal, like a Sheik! Sabah's family help her prepare lunch and her youngest daughter Rima, makes me a braided bracelet in red and white. Sabah is a fabulous cook and all her children have learned well for they are all very handy in the kitchen. They prepare a lovely lunch, and we eat when Nazim returns. The craic is good but I cannot eat. I stick to a little bread and coke, as very little else here is agreeing with me. I dislike coke intensely but I have to keep drinking fluids and flat coke definitely helps the nausea.

Later in the afternoon, Ahmed collects us and we drive around more war torn areas and do some filming and then back to the hotel. I have been upgraded to a suite with a sea view. They take me into the suite only to find a man just out of the shower wrapped in a face-cloth. Either that or he s very well endowed. I hadn't realised the tariff included such a handsome Palestinian! We leave him for 10 minutes, they re-tidy the room and it's ready. A room with windows that open, heaven! The Queen Anne settee and chairs and the chandelier seem strangely out of place overlooking a beach with Unicef tents. It must have been quite beautiful here in its day.



Room with a view

We are going to a BBQ tonight and I have just a little time to shower and change. It is being hosted by an eminent physician here in Gaza for his friends, most of whom are medical or pharmaceutical by profession, their wives and children. It is nice to get dressed up and put on a little make-up and I am glad of the maxi dress I threw in at the last minute.

I speak to the women here of the war and the impact it had of them. Unlike, most women I have met this week, these are not used to poverty. The hostess is a charming woman, quite beautiful, with an understated style. She longs to visit her brothers and sisters who live all over the world, however she says

she is imprisoned, cannot leave to visit them and unlike in a prison, they cannot visit. She speaks of the first day of the war and the sheer chaos and her fear for the safety of her children. She is the second person this week to tell me she thought it was the end of the world. She also gives thanks that her family are safe but she says “*something has changed in all of us*”.

“When I ventured to the windows, the views were indescribable. On one occasion, a woman killed by a rocket right in front the house, her head and limbs blown in all directions. I turned to see my youngest daughter also watching; children should not see things like this, none of us should. It is difficult to find answers for their many whys?”, she explains.

She goes on to speak of a grandmother attending her husband’s clinic, who was looking after her teenage grand-daughter who was asthmatic. The young girl told her grandmother she just couldn’t stand the endless bombing any longer and she was going out to sit in the car and listen to some music to relax. Her grandmother found her there 30 minutes later, dead, a fatal asthmatic attack. Others have also died from their asthma. Indeed, many with chronic disease have died in this war, heart attacks from the sheer stress and anxiety and these figures are not reflected in the death toll.

I ask our hostess about her own health. She says her hearing is affected. She has had constant tinnitus and while it may seem minor, in comparison to many injuries, it is troublesome and medicines do not give any relief. She has post-traumatic hearing defect and I am sure there are many like her. Also, she, as many, suffer general aches and pains, particularly in the shoulders and neck, classical symptoms of stress. I recommend some physiotherapy for the stress, very little that can be done for the tinnitus, but it may go, in time. All of the other women present describe similar head, neck and shoulder tension.

We move on to lighter subjects and the craic is good. The men are all seated at one side of the garden and the women at the other. I suggest it is like a dance in Ireland one hundred years ago! Well, maybe not that far back. This is how it is in Palestine. The food is good and another question, from one of the men, who are the best cooks – men or women? Men, at BBQ-ing I offer and women at cooking. I cannot enjoy the food, I have no appetite, so many children have so little to eat here that it sticks in my throat. We talk of many things far removed from the war and soon the night is filled with laughter. Humour is so important.

It is strange to be at a BBQ that has no alcohol. I think of the many barbys and parties in my own home over the years and cannot imagine them swinging without alcohol. Right now, I could murder a cold Carlsberg. It’s a Friday night thing. I will have to wait until I get home.

We say goodnight to our gracious hosts and thank them for their kind hospitality. Back to work tomorrow and when I return to the hotel, I prepare the envelopes of cash assistance, toys, sweets for the families tomorrow, recharge my camera and video camera and update my blog. Tomorrow, we will visit families here in Gaza city.



Tuesday's Child toys

As I say my night prayers and I thank God again for enabling my 2 week trip here. I ask Him for another inspiration and this time I open at the following message: *"I want to talk to souls about love of neighbour. My children, people are precious and every person on this earth is of infinite value to Me and My heavenly plan. But often the value is overlooked because of a worldly view of life. If I have placed a person on this earth, I intend that person to be adequately fed. You must proceed from that assumption. Dear little soul, so earnestly trying to serve Me, if you know a soul who is not fed, perhaps I intended that you feed that person and that is why I reveal that person's plight to you. Be thoughtfully considerate when you hear of a person or a group of people who are hungry. Then, ask Me what it is I am asking that you do in the matter. Perhaps I am merely looking for prayers. Perhaps I am making you aware of the great blessings that have been bestowed on you. Or perhaps I am asking that you share in your wealth and support My workers who are attempting to feed souls. Again, perhaps I am asking you to be one of those souls who ministers directly to unfortunates, who lack the barest necessities for human existence. You have a role. You must ask Me to reveal it to you so that souls on earth are not housed in bodies that cannot develop because they lack food. I see every need of every soul on earth...It is My intention that My children serve each other...Many are starving today in your world. My children, this is yet another symptom of the Age of Disobedience, a time when more souls defy Me than serve me. I do not want people starving. Ask me what you can do"* (www.directionforourtimes, volume 2)

I ask Him to lead me to the people who are most in need in the week I have left and I pray again for an end to this terrible siege.

If you are in a position to help any of the families we met during our time in Gaza, please contact us at info@tuesdayschild.co.uk or [donate online](#)

[Continues to Day 6 »](#)

Tuesday's Child Blog

Tuesday's Child Returns to Gaza – Day 6

Saturday 11th July 2009

We start at 10 a.m. this morning and our first stop is to another Women's Community Group I met on my last visit to the strip here. We are later than planned as I struggle with the umpteenth internet crash in the hotel; I don't think I would have the patience to live in Gaza. This women's development initiative helps about 30 women who make beautiful embroidery in their own homes. We bought a large batch last year, kindly bought by pilgrims from Northern Ireland visiting the Holy Land. The embroidery includes: hand-bags, cushion covers, table clothes, purses, wallets, pencil cases, mobile phone holders, book covers, tissue boxes, glasses cases, dresses and shoes. The money then goes back to each woman involved in the project. I buy almost all of their stock to bring back and sell at home.



Sabah with members of the Women's group who co-ordinate the embroidery project

Our first visit of this morning is with the Yousif Abu Haseen family, who live in a derelict area of Gaza city. When we arrive as the mother of the house is baking. This is a family of 6, 4 children, the eldest of whom, Layla, is severely disabled. The family are new to the food distribution programme. The house is tiny and hard to believe a family can live in such a tiny space, so much so that their mother is making pastry in the narrow corridor. I think back to my own home growing up and baking with my mother and grandmother in our huge kitchen and what a joy it was. My mother would sing around the kitchen and I would follow her also singing into the rolling pin of my children's baking set. Happy times. I notice unlike many houses, however, her bowls are nice and clean.

They describe their sheer terror during the war. The food they receive lasts for about 2 weeks. I meet their children and I ask them what they would like to do when they finish school. Zahra would like to be a journalist and Zena



hopes to be an elementary school teacher. Arenia is already at university studying social work. Their 3 cousins join in the fun, Ali wants to be an engineer, Jasem a lawyer and Doa a human rights lawyer. I wish them well with their aspirations and tell them they will have to study hard and we give Mrs Abu Haseen cash assistance for the months ahead. I ask what services are available for Layla; she has no access to adult disability services and stays at home. I wonder what this little soul made of terror of the war and if she could express her fears in the same way as her siblings.



Mrs Abu Haseen making bread dough in the hallway of her home



Mr and Mrs Abu Haseen with two of their four children, Arenia and Zahra

On now, to visit the Tamam Abo Sedo family of 10 children in the same area. Mr Abo Sedo lost his hand in an industrial accident at work and is now unemployed as is his eldest son who, for a time, used to be the main breadwinner for the family. Mrs Abo Sedo previously worked as a volunteer and has now returned to college to study social work. She is very bubbly and desperately wants a better life for her children. The house is very poor and she shows me the damage the house took during the war. Her eldest son is still in bed and I ask him if he wants to get up and tell me about himself. He joins us as and I ask him what he would like to do. He tells me there is nothing to do and there is no chance of employment. It is the same all over Gaza. I ask him what he enjoys and he says he likes art and painting. I ask him to show me some of his drawings and he takes me into the living room where he draws his pictures on the wall. The family cannot afford paper for such luxuries and I promise to send him an art book and paints. His younger brother is studying at university in the same year as his mother. "I am

studying social work with my mother but there is no work for most young people in Gaza”, he explains.



Unemployed Mamoud with one of his younger brothers



One of Mamoud's paintings on the wall of the living room

The children gather round as we pass out the sweets and I ask them what they are brilliant at and there are giggles all round. I tell them to think about it as I will be back later on to find out. Again, when it comes to career aspirations they are very high and reflective of the recent war here. In this home, we have 2 budding doctors, a journalist, a construction engineer, a social worker and a lawyer. I suggest they will have to follow their mother's example and

work very hard. Again, we distribute cash assistance and sweets for the children. As we leave the block, there are two young children playing with a washing machine. The right to play and leisure is so important I could kick myself for leaving this morning without some toys. For now, the sweets will have to do.



Two little boys having fun with a broken washing machine

Our third visit is to the Hani El Jamal family of 7 children and 1 on the way. They are extremely poor and Mr El Jamal is mentally ill and has been shamed by some in the local area; such illnesses sadly promote stigma instead of support and rehabilitation, a universal failure in humanity. They describe the war and how they had no food and very little water for 15 days. They all stayed close together in the one room and did not sleep for the duration of the war for they were too afraid. Sometimes, they tried sleeping in shifts but it was impossible as the bombs fell constantly. In this family we have a budding journalist and a doctor. The food lasts for about 2 weeks and this household is also eligible for food from UNRWA that they can access every 60 days. We give cash assistance here and the mother is thrilled with the help.



The El Jamal family with 5 of their 7 children

The fourth family today is the Basam Obaid family of 11 including 8 children and their grandmother. When we enter the home we find the grandmother very distressed as 4 of her sons were arrested last week by Hamas, one at the university, and she has not heard from them since. The grandmother's generation originally came to Gaza from Syria and so they are also eligible for food from UNRWA. Our food lasts for about 15 days which together with

the 60 day supply from UNRWA sees them better off than most. I ask about the war. *“It was terrible, really frightening, explains”*, Mrs El Jamal, *“and we are still afraid that they will return”*. Her 10 yr old son Mohammed tells me he saw 5 children in the same street killed all of whom were his friends and 2 of whom were brothers. He describes how the 5 were killed by shells and as he says, *“their bodies, were cut to pieces, there were bits of their bodies all over the place”*. He tells me he wants to be an engineer when he grows up. And again the same career aspirations as in previous homes this morning: doctors, journalists, social workers are the choices here. One sister is disabled and cannot speak. I ask if she goes to a special school, and her mother says, that they tried but she would not go and is now too afraid to leave the home. Again, we give cash assistance and sweets and bid farewell. The grandmother asks if we can help with her sons for it is almost all of her family taken. I tell her, we cannot, but we will pray for their safe return.



Grandmother Obaid, very distressed over the arrest of 4 of her sons



Little boy close to spot where 5 children were killed in a rocket attack in Jan '09

We leave this area and drive to Beach Camp, a profoundly Hamas area, with green flags everywhere, not unlike Co Fermanagh this time last year in the run up to the Ulster Final. I think of Sunday and hope that Antrim can do what it takes to win in Clones against Tyrone, for God knows we need it. Come on the saffrons! Back to the visits!

The family here is the Zenaib Abu El Anzeen, of seven people, and again a grandmother here who is also crying and really very distressed. When we

arrive there are just 3 in the house, the grandmother, her daughter (sister) and one of the children; the parents and the rest of the children are at the hospital. The little girl answers the door, her aunt and her grandmother are in bed and they both make an appearance. The reason we help this family is really because of the grandmother as she is incontinent and needs incontinence pads. I ask Sabah about incontinence services for the elderly and she explains there are none. She could do with a continence assessment and appropriate prescription of pads for her needs. She sits in the chair now outside her bedroom and cries. I ask the little girl, Sahar, how she is. I ask her what she enjoys and she says nothing. I ask her what she wants to study and she says nothing. I cannot help but feel that the atmosphere here in this home is doing little for this child's development. Her aunt tells us that a few months ago Tony Blair came to visit their home and he promised them help but no help came. I go out to the car as I remember seeing one Sleeping Beauty colouring book, with stickers and pens in the back seat and I bring it in and give it to Sahar and she smiles. I tell her that she needs to study and think of her future and I will call back on my next visit to see how she is getting on. I ask her if she is taking part in the summer games and she says no. We give cash assistance again and I leave worrying for the future of this beautiful child clearly affected by the social deprivation she is living in. As for Tony Blair, I have a good mind to write to him about his empty promises to little children. I guess, that's politicians for you. They make empty promises and give false hope the world over; the lip service kings.



Family home that Tony Blair pledged to help

Our next family we visit has 11 children and when we arrive several are in the bathroom showering. *"It is the first time we have had water this week"*, explains the mother, *"so everyone is having their shower today"*. This is a lively and vibrant home, very different to the previous. The children are bursting with ideas for their future – here they include: doctors, an engineer, a journalist and a teacher of Arabic. I tell the latter I will come and join their class as I have very little Arabic. The family lost their home in the war and moved to this rented accommodation costing a hefty 100 US dollars per month. They are just about to prepare lunch and looking into the kitchen the little they have is heart-breaking, about 15 chips, of which 3 are set aside for the youngest little girl and some vegetables that look like yams but I am not sure. We don't have them in Ireland anyway! I ask how long the food lasts, about 12 days, the mother says and the next food distribution is next week. The father is unemployed, he used to work as a painter, but now it is hard to find paint in Gaza except at high prices through the tunnels making an income from the trade impossible. Regardless, he has a heart condition and having suffered a heart attack a few weeks after the war, he has been told to take it easy and avoid stress and anxiety. Little or no food, rent he cannot meet, no job and 11 children to feed, how can he possibly avoid stress?! His 12 year

old son, Ahmed, was hurt in the war, and the child lifts his t-shirts to show scar marks of many stitches that run all the way around his abdomen up his side and diagonally across his back. There is great excitement over the sweets and some of the children can't get out of the shower quick enough. We leave cash assistance for rent and food with the family and they parents are very grateful. I find the gratitude displayed in each home so very humbling and wish I had more to give, however we have many families to help these 2 weeks.



The El Alzeen family in their rented home



Cooker in EL Alzeen kitchen



Lunch for 11 people

Our next visit is just next door and up a huge staircase to perhaps one of the most heart-rending stories of the morning. Here a young woman with her family also cares for two elderly parents. Her mother suffered a heart attack followed by a stroke and is now bedridden, incontinent and has lost her

speech. She is fed via an NG tube. The incontinence pads cost 28 shekels per pack and she she needs 8 per month. Again, I doubt she has ever had an incontinence assessment. The poor woman looks miserable although she understands every word. Her window on life is grim, a grey discoloured room badly in need of painting, torn curtains and not as much as a picture or a flower. I wonder how she managed through the war and how she expressed her needs during these terrifying weeks. We give cash assistance to her daughter and also monies to decorate her room, buy nice curtains and some paintings for her mother to look at. I ask Sabah to come back in one month and take photos of the work. The daughter is clearly very dedicated to her mother. Her brothers' wives also help and give her some respite. She also has a family of her own to take care of, yet all of the allocation goes to her mother. We agree to double the allocation to this family, 2 coupons, one for food and one for incontinence pads. I think of the boxes of pads I could send from home, but with the blockade it would be impossible to get them through.



Mrs Fathma Baewy



Fathma's view

As we are leaving, I look back and in another room spot an elderly man peering out of his room – her father. I had not realised she looked after both parents here. His mobility is very poor although he has a large old-fashioned crutch and he hobbles out in his underwear to say hello. I give him a bag of sweets and he is delighted. I wonder when was the last time, he managed to get out of the house and down the huge flight of steps, daunting for even an able-bodied person. He could do with a chair lift, electricity pending!



Mr Baewy

Coming downstairs and back onto the street, we meet two of the young boys from the previous family, carrying food back to their home. It's kebabs for the family and I am delighted they are going to have a decent lunch today.



Cash assistance for one family quickly put to use for decent lunch

It's 2.30 p.m now and we leave the visits for now as between 2 and 4 is not a good time for families I am told. I arrange to meet Sabah again at 7 p.m.

Later this evening our first stop is the supermarket in the Gaza city area. This evening, Sabah brings both her daughters with her. They are enjoying being

part of the humanitarian work. I am introduced to the owner and we talk about food prices and family allowances. He sources food from suppliers in the West Bank, Egypt and Israel and also the tunnels. I ask him what percentage from tunnel supplies and he says about 20 percent. Sabah explains how he helped prepare food parcels with her during the war and I thank him. The families like the food coupons he says and choices vary between families, but for the most part they opt for core essentials, rice, flour, oil, tinned meat, tinned tuna, lentils. I ask if he can put together a common shop and going to his ledgers, he pulls out the food choice for one family in last month's distribution and asks one of his employees to put it together. I thank him for his time. I also stock up considerably here on the sweets as he has a good supply and again buy some lion bars, the mileage from the story still continues and we have a good laugh again. Sabah explains the lion and the tunnel tale to the perplexed supermarket owner who is at a loss to understand why we are in stitches laughing over chocolate bars.



Supermarket in Gaza City, used for food distribution

On now into the main shopping area of Gaza city to look for a washing machine for the family we met last Tuesday, as promised. There are two shops and Ahmed has already done his homework, sourcing the best value and getting us a little discount. After 15 minutes or so, we decide on the best washing machine, a twin tub rather than a standard automatic given the electricity curfews. The machine is wrapped and carried to the car and we head for Beit Hanoun.



Sabah and Ahmed with the new washing machine

It is getting dark now and with no electricity or street lights it is a hard drive. We pass many donkeys and carts through this area. Ahmed cannot understand my love of donkeys. I tell him I have always liked them since my childhood, but unlike Gaza, in Ireland they usually roam free and have a much nicer life eating apples and sugar lumps! I also explain that the donkey, in our faith, is an animal of esteem, as it carried Our Lady to Bethlehem and also the Baby Jesus in the flight into Egypt. I guess Mohammed didn't travel by donkey.

Sharifa's house is proving hard to find in the dark. We drive through little streets shattered by war and the poverty here is appalling. Litter is everywhere and even at this time in the dark, the area is over-run by children. We find her street and knock at the door. She is overjoyed and all the family come out to welcome the new washing machine. Neighbours pour in from nearby houses and there is great excitement. Sharifa can't contain herself as Sabah runs through how to operate the machine and all the children have a peer in. She hugs and kisses me many times and her daughter gives me a bracelet she has woven for me. Sabah's daughter, Rima, passes round the sweets. Again the word spreads and there are many children gathering outside hoping for a sweet. The new supply isn't lasting long.



Sharifa overjoyed with the arrival of her washing machine

I also give Sharifa multivitamins for 9 of her children under 12 yrs. Time to take our leave as we have still one family to visit and we leave one very happy woman. As with all children, they love to see their photos. Each picture we take of a child or group of children we show them the photo afterwards and it is a source of great amusement. Digital cameras should be supplied to every family in Gaza!



6 of Sharifa's 11 children

We head back to Gaza City, our other planned visit doesn't materialise as the family are at the hospital. We will return again. We discuss our itinerary for tomorrow for our visit to the middle area.

Tonight, when I return to the hotel, I meet a French physician just arrived with a team of plastic surgeons to treat children in Rafah hospital. He shows me a video of their work. He is angry as they only have 3 days here and they waited at Rafah for one week. I tell him of our own wait at Rafah back in February. I tell him of some of the children I have met in need of his services and ask if he can help. He said, they would be happy to help on their next visit to the strip and we exchange contact details. I think of the little girl I met a few days ago with the foot defect.

Tonight I pray that He sends his divine love to heal all those I met today who are suffering and all those across this tiny strip of land. I lift my little book and the it opens at this: *"I was a humble man, who walked your paths of difficulty, want and hardship. Many treated Me badly, so I understand the pain of hurt. We had little money, so I understand the pain of hunger. I was different, so I understand the pain of isolation. Little ones I am with you"*. Again, I feel these words are for everyone in Gaza. I open again at another page *"The love in My heart gushes forth upon your world...I see so many in need of Me, and truly, they shall have Me. Bring my words to those who suffer. My words will be the balm you will use to nurse souls back to wellness. Like heavenly nurses, you will apply My words to every wound and you will see miraculous results. My children, I am working through you. I am using you as healing instruments. Your world is sick and suffers from a disease far worse than any disease of the body. The very soul of your world struggles now, to find the source of healing it requires. And I am here. I intend to heal your world"*. I ask him if He can prioritise the gaping bleeding wound that is Gaza, more like an aneurysm than a wound.

If you are in a position to help any of the families we met during our time in Gaza, please contact us at info@tuesdayschild.co.uk or [donate online](#)

[Continues to Day 7 »](#)

Tuesday's Child Blog

Tuesday's Child Returns to Gaza – Day 7

Sunday 12th July 2009

This morning started with mass at the Holy Family Church in the old part of Gaza city. The new parish priest, Fr Jorge Hernandez, newly arrived from Argentina 3 months ago, celebrates mass. He is young and vibrant and already bringing many new innovations to the parish. The faith of the people here is incredible, notwithstanding what they have endured over recent months. The prayer and singing especially, in Arabic, is very uplifting.

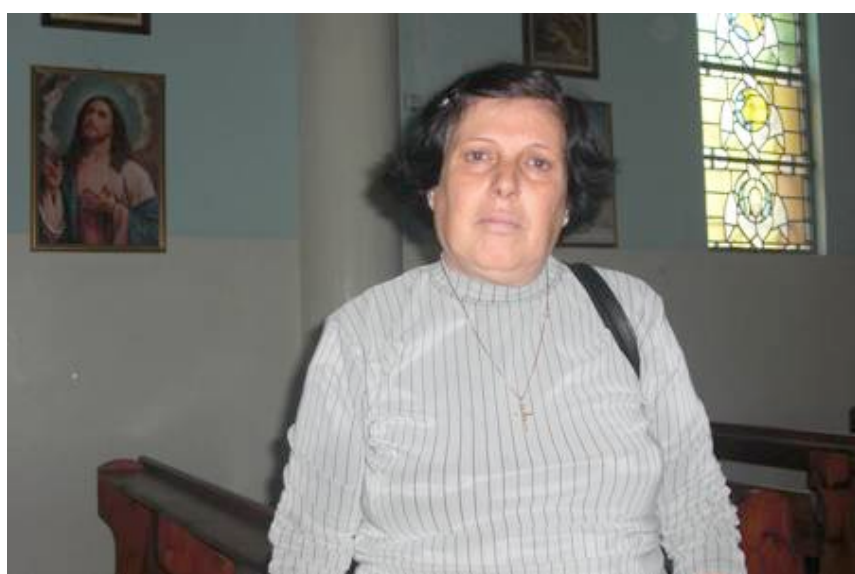


The Holy Family Church, Gaza City



Looking around the congregation I see that The Missionary Sisters of Charity are here, and after mass, I chat to the fabulous 83 yr old Sr Joan from Malta, whom I met last year, when staying at her convent. I give a donation from Tuesday's Child towards the disabled children in their care and promise toys next week. Also here this morning, The Little Sisters of Jesus who live in solidarity with the people in the Christian camp of Rada. I am surprised to see one of them and glad that she has made it back into Gaza, after her antics and gesticulations to Israeli security at Erez last year. The memory makes me giggle. She entertained everyone waiting to cross Erez with her face pulling, tongue sticking and spectrum of salutations towards the Israeli security which while hilarious, could easily have prevented any possibility of return.

A parishioner who waved at me several times during mass, comes over to talk. She tells me her story and dissolves into tears, her whole body racked with sobbing. *"I hate Gaza, I hate Gaza"*, she screams, *"I have no life here, only suffering and the little life I had they have taken away with the death of my son and the loss of our home. Please, help me get out of here. Please, I beg you, help me, I hate it, help me go to my son in Germany"*. She opens her handbag and gives me a letter written by Fr Jorge outlining her predicament. I explain, gently, that I cannot help her but will refer her letter on to an organisation who may be in position to support her plea. She is very nervous and is shaking as she speaks *"Why did my lovely son have to die, what harm did he do? How can God allow this to happen to me? All my life I have suffered, I cannot take any more"*. I try and soothe her but she is inconsolable. I offer to take her picture and tell her story. The poor pet. She has no money and it is a Sunday, she explains and she has nothing for the family for lunch. I give her some money and she hugs me tightly, still crying. I put my arm round her and sit with her and listen until the hysterical crying reduces to quiet tears. I tell her that she must spend some of the money on herself and try to relax and I will be back next week and will see her again then.



Manairva Saba, aged 46 yrs who lost her son and her home in Operation Cast Lead

I go back into the church hoping for some quiet time, but I am inundated with parishioners, curious to know who the new arrival is. And there are many questions. Are you a journalist? Are you Swedish? Are you a doctor? I explain I am an NGO worker from Ireland. They smile when they hear Ireland. *"We love the Irish, John Ging is Irish!"*, one man says. I am now convinced really that John Ging should run for President. The young people gather round and three young guys continue to sit with me. No chance of any solitude now so we talk of life in Gaza for their generation and how they found the war. They speak of the horror of the war and their fear of further incursion. *"It is all we have known since we were infants"* offers one, *"but this latest attack was on an unprecedented scale, it shook Gaza to the core"*. I ask three young men, Jaleel, Amin and Karam what they enjoy. Jaleel tells me he loves traditional dancing and I ask him to give me a demonstration. *"Here in the church?"*, he asks surprised. *"Yes right here, sure don't you know I am The Lord of the Dance said He"*. He gives me a big grin and tells me he likes that one and starts to dance, it is not unlike traditional Irish. I tell him it is like Riverdance, just a little slower. I also ask them what area they each want to follow. Jaleel, 19 yrs, is at university studying accountancy, Amir, 16 yrs is still at school and would like to be an engineer and Karam, 21 yrs, hopes for a career in business. I ask Amir what he enjoys and he says *"I love music, all kinds of music but especially English music, however it is very boring for us in Gaza as there is little hope here and nothing to do each day and we cannot*

leave”. Karam says “*I would love to travel, but we are imprisoned here and life is very difficult. I want to travel, to study abroad and to see something of the world*”.



Three young men from the Holy Family Parish, Jaleel, Amir and Karam

Fr Jorge and I chat and he mentions the importance of music for the young people and for creative outlets. He tells me it is difficult for children and young people to access music and there are no music shops like we have at home. I tell him about the musical instruments I have brought from Ireland and his face lights up. He says he has been trying to source instruments but again there are no shops here for such things. I tell him we were hoping to start a music club here for children and maybe he could help with this. He says he would be delighted and we agree to meet back at the hotel in half an hour.

A short time later Fr Jorge arrives at the hotel, with Jaleel in tow and I bring down the cache of musical instruments to their great interest and pleasure. I explain the guitars and the violin will need tuning as the strings had to be loosened before flying. The violin was kindly donated by Patricia from Dublin the day before my departure. I take a photo of Fr Jorge with the violin and make a mental note to send her a copy when I get home. I have brought quite a range and a lot of percussion – tambourines, castanets, maracas, wood blocks, triangles, chimes, horns, bells, and 20 tin whistles with how to play the whistle books in 6 languages. Also, 40 sets of drumsticks, but they will have to make their own drums as I could not bring these through customs without being destroyed. I was relieved as it is, to get them through, as the luggage insisted on playing a few tell-tale notes as I tried to manoeuvre the heavy trolleys through Tel Aviv airport.



Fr Jorge and try out some of the musical instruments

I have to say good-bye to Fr Jorge as time to get ready to visit more families, this time in the Middle Area of Mousader. I have the procedure down to a fine art now – restock the sweets, select toys for range of ages, prepare envelopes with cash assistance, recharge camera, video and mobile – next time I must bring two travel plugs! Thank God for the hotel generator!

It is a glorious sunny afternoon, and, as anywhere else along the Mediterranean, this should be a fabulous place to be. However, I have yet to take a walk along the beach or even to the end of the pier, as the smell from the sea is putrid. If this was my beloved Donegal I would be out in flash walking along the coast, albeit with my springers, Hogan and Cusack, splashing beside me. That apart, a female is not permitted to walk along the beach, unaccompanied, at risk of being escorted off by Hamas. Bikinis and sarongs are an absolute no-no here, as are swimsuits, even shorts and t-shirts are not permitted. However, I continue to wear my T-shirts as it is simply impossible to bear anything with sleeves in this heat. Earlier in the week, there was sheer panic in our group as I tell them, while sitting at beachside cafe, that I am just going to the ladies to change into my bikini and take a swim. They put up their hands in horror and the men almost choke on their pipes as I insist, telling them I am Irish and not Palestinian and human rights and all that. It's a wind up of-course and they fall about laughing when I return still clothed and realise I was only pulling their leg.



Road to Mousader

Driving down to the middle area, the view is beautiful with the sun skimming

the surface of the water, but again the smell of raw sewage for the duration is terrible. God only knows what bugs are growing in the sea and yet the children are swimming and splashing in it. The beach is all they have. Mousader is very different to Northern Gaza, very rural, a bit like Armoy in comparison to Belfast. We meet our aid co-ordinator for this region, Mohammed, he has much more grey than this time last year I note.



Gazan coastline

Our first stop is with the Jomaa Gabrel family of 13. The mother here tells me she does a lot of baking and needs 4 bags of flour per month and most of her money goes on this. They talk of their terror during the war. A 5 KG bag of flour costs a staggering 140 shekels. The children who are at home come out to greet us and we speak of their hopes for the future. Here in this home, Aisha would like to be a journalist, Sadia, a teacher, Belal, a teacher of religion and Amal would be content having her own home and family and being a housewife. We give them so cash assistance and Ahmed dispenses the sweets.



Jomaa Gabrel family



Jomaa Gabrel home



Bag of Israeli flour costing 140 shekels

On to the Khalid Ead family, who live just down the road. Mrs Ead explains that 40 of their extended family came to stay in her house during the war and thankfully no-one was hurt or injured but that it was a terrifying experience. She shows me the many holes in her corrugated iron roof. Her eldest son was at university studying, but gave up his place to his younger sister who desperately wanted to go onto third level education and the family cannot afford to send more than one child to university. I ask how much fees are per year and he tells me 500 US dollars and there is just no way the family can afford it. Ameen has completed one year of social work and explains he would love to complete his degree. I promise to find him a sponsor in Ireland for the forthcoming year.



Khadra and Waaem Ead who would like to be a teacher and a doctor, respectively

The third call this afternoon is with the Mostafa Louh family, totalling 32 people including 25 children. It is huge, there are children everywhere! There are 4 small houses here together behind the gate, a small hut each for the father, his 3 sons and each of their families. There is great excitement as they are getting ready to go to a neighbour's wedding and the arrival of visitors with sweets is almost too much. Mrs Louh is very excitable and keeps hugging me and kissing me. She also keeps stroking my face, the way an old man might pull on his beard and I wonder if I need a chin wax for she keeps playing with my face like this. This is quite a new experience for me and Sabah explains it is a term of endearment in Gaza and mothers often reserve it for their children. That apart, she is fascinated with my hair as well as my face and she strokes it now also, it is very weird. I try and call the extended family together for a photograph and the children appear from everywhere. How can the monthly food allocation feed so many, yet they are very happy with what they get. I ask her how she can manage so many children. She gives me a toothless smile and much to everyone's amusement re-enacts her child-bearing and breast-feeding abilities. The woman belongs on a stage.



Mrs Louh and 6 of her children

I am told later of a story that is perhaps one of the most shocking I will hear in terms of lack of food during the war. One day, Mohammed called with supplies for the family and he found a baby being suckled by a dog that had just had pups. As they had no money for milk and the mother had finished breast-feeding, they fed the children this way as they had nothing else to give

them and the dog kindly obliged. I cannot believe it, truly shocking, that this blockade has reduced families to such extreme measures. I give Mrs Louh her envelope of cash, quickly backing out the gate to avoid any more face and hair stroking but she runs after me and I am caught again much to the amusement of Sabah and Ahmed.



The extended Louh family

The fourth stop is with a much smaller Bedouin family of 4. Their home is very poor but they have a range of animals including rabbits, chickens, hens and sheep. Mrs Kwash tells us that the monthly food coupon makes a huge difference and they would not survive without it. Also, that it lasts them for about 3 weeks. I chat to the only daughter who is at home and she tells me she loves school and she wants to be a doctor when she grows up, that way, if there is another war, she will be able to save the lives of some of the children who might otherwise die.



Aysha Kwash family



Aysha Kwash farm

It is a short drive to our next family and, as we approach, I recognise the laneway that leads to Mona's home. We met Mona and her 10 children last year and they featured in our film. It is great to see them all alive for plastic sheeting gives very little protection against mortar bombs and white phosphorus. I notice the large mound of rubble that was the former home, demolished by Israeli tanks in 2007, has been removed now; at least they no longer have to look out on the wreck of it. Most of the children are out playing and only the 4 youngest are at home with their mother, Baha, Mohammed, Sada and Ensaf. I give Mona an envelope with cash assistance for the coming year and multivitamins for all of children under 12. I notice that the two boys have an eye defect and will need referral for treatment, but this is expensive. We talk of the war and the Mohammed tells me "*I was not afraid of the planes and helicopters, only the tanks*" and I tell him he is very brave (it was ofcourse a tank that came in the night and demolished their home 2 years ago, closely followed by his father's death). The children say the all love school and all subjects and school and all here want to be teachers when they grow up. Mona is looking better than she did this time last year, I tell her and she is pleased.



Mona Said, widow, and 4 of her 10 children



Mohammed and Baha Said

We drive several miles to the next family, through fields ruined by a stampede of tanks. Track marks are still evident and it hits home that this was a war of unleashed huge military power against the most impoverished of people with little in this area to defend themselves. This visit is to the Maleha El Kodaim household of 8 children and here we have 2 aspiring doctors and 3 teachers. The mother, grandmother and one brother all suffer from a disability. Their father explains how they managed through the war *“We left our home each night to stay in the nearest UNRWA school and returned to our home each day. The bombing was worst in the night-time, it was terrifying. We were short of food and water and the children still have nightmares. As you see we are only 500 metres from the border and they will not go anywhere now unless I am with them. We are very lucky to be alive, you can see how close they came, ploughing through the fields beside the house”*. Again, we give the same cash assistance as to the other families here.



Tank tracks still evident 6 months on



Maleha El Kodaim family

Our next stop is at the home of the Salah El Louh family of 13 children. This family is sponsored by Peggy, who joined the Tuesday's Child team last summer. All the children here love school and their favourite subjects include reading, Arabic, English and football. Two of the children want to be doctors and two say they want to be teachers. The 2 eldest wanted to study nursing and teaching but were unable to continue after secondary school as the family had no money for college fees. Mrs El Louh tells us that with so many to feed, the food just lasts for 10 days at the most. I ask how she manages, and she says she struggles, but neighbours here help each other out. I ask what the family had for lunch today and she says bread and tomatoes. I was unaware until this visit that so many teenagers miss out on the opportunity of third level education because of lack of funds. Support for these young people is essential and a consideration we will have to develop on my return. We give the family cash assistance and the parents are overwhelmed. It is the same story in each home, and on each occasion, these God-fearing people give thanks to Him. Hamdullilah!



Salah El Louh family

It is getting dark now as we arrive at the small homestead of the Hekmat Obaid family. Here, 11 children live with their mother, a widow. Their father Joseph died of cancer last year. I ask about the war. *“Words cannot begin to describe the sheer terror of the war that seemed never-ending. Many of the children cried for their father and missed him more than ever in their fear. We live only 300 metres from the border and we thought we would all be killed. We hid in the animal pens. My younger sons clung tightly to their*

uncle in the absence of their father. We did not sleep for over a month and even when it was over we were too traumatised to sleep. Many of the animals in the fields were shot or run down by tanks; it was terrible, there was no regard for any form of life". I ask how long the food lasts and I am told just over one week, it is not enough. I talk with the eldest son, Mohammed, he has just finished school and wants to be a teacher but there is no money for him to go to college. I tell him I will try and find him a sponsor in Ireland.



Mrs Obaid points to the Israeli border, 300 metres from her home



Mrs Obaid, widow, with her 11 children



Brothers, sisters, friends and neighbours

The word spreads in the area and many other families arrive at this homestead asking us for help. It is impossible to help everyone and yet I am acutely aware that many others here are also in great need. Sabah has a difficult job selecting families for support. One young father approaches me begging for

help. He carries two young children, one in each arm, brother and sister, Bara and Rouia. Both children are blind. How terrified they must have been in the war. He tells me his story and I listen. Both children were referred to eye specialists here in Gaza. The cost of investigations cost him 2000 USD and he had to raise first before treatment was considered, only to be told that in each case, the blindness was reversible and correctible by surgery only available outside of Gaza. I asked how he managed to raise such a large amount of money. He explains, his father and uncles helped, each giving him something and many neighbours here in the area chipped in what little they could and he also sold some of his few possessions. He asks us if we can help him. I give him money for his family but tell him there is not much else I can do directly. I ask him however for copies of letters from the hospital and I will refer them on to others who may be in a position to influence transfers and effect treatment. I am outraged that professional people here can charge a starving farmer this kind of money for ophthalmic examination of two blind children. How can they bleed their own people like this? It is appalling.



Bara and Rouia Abo Shehada, who both need corrective eye surgery for blindness

We return to Mohammed's home and meet his wife and 5 children who also get a share in the sweets and toys for this area. We discuss at length the families tonight, their needs and the many more families here who are in need of help. Really, we are only scratching the surface and soon the cash assistance provided to each household on the trip will run out. The need is vast and, at times, our work seems a little futile, like putting a band aid on an aneurysm.

I get back to my hotel at midnight. The combination of heat, ongoing sickness and dehydration are taking its toll and I feel quite weak and dizzy. Yet I am healthy. How must those who have been starved over the years of this blockade be feeling, and as if this was not enough, to then have to deal with the mighty blow of this war and its grim repercussions. Suffering to this extreme, should not be permitted. The tragedy is, that unlike many countries in the world, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is not a natural disaster, it is man-made and nowhere in the world is man's inhumanity to man, more evident. I wish everyone in Ireland could experience the horror of Gaza, maybe then Tuesday's Child could make a real difference. However, as far as the media are concerned, Gaza is yesterday's news and raising awareness is a challenge.

I take the two letters handed to me today out of my bag and read them. The first is that of Manairva Saba, whom I met in the chapel this morning. The letter is in English and starts To Whom It May Concern and reads as follows: *"We are a Christian family of 6 members who used to live in the Sheikh*

Redwan Quarter in Gaza. On the 6th January 2009, our home was shelled with 5 missiles at 4 a.m. and was followed by a shell from an F16 that destroyed the whole house. The next day, our son was shelled and martyred while he was talking on the telephone with his brother in Germany, while he was standing before our shattered house. We are now temporarily living in a rented house owned by relatives as our house was totally destroyed. We kindly ask you to help us get out of the Gaza strip for we can't bear living here any longer. Our elder son who lives in Germany is preparing immigration paperwork for the whole family. Therefore, we ask, whosoever can help to reunite our family to do so with our thanks, prayers and gratitude. I now have three children, Salim aged 26 yrs, George aged 22 yrs and Ramzi, aged 14 yrs. My son, Nazeem, who was killed, was also 26 yrs". There must be hundreds of letters like this in Gaza.

The second is a medical letter on Ministry of Health headed paper outlining a referral report with the medical history and clinical findings of the Abu Shehada family. The investigations are relatively routine and I am again appalled that this impoverished family have been charged 2000 USD for routine eye examinations of their twins. It makes my blood boil.

I note that the respective letters are from the first and last people I have met today and I pray to the Infant Child for his intercession in both cases. I open volume 6 of direction for our times and my gaze falls on the following words "*My little ones, it is My greatest wish that you remain close to Me..always remember me and remember that I love you. I will help you dear child. I will help you in many ways...If you are my friend, you can ask Me to do things for you and I will, as long as you are asking Me to help others. Believe in Me, dear child*". I ask Him to help these people today in their struggles and their needs for the families. I will pass these letters on to others and leave my petition for help for them in His hands.

If you are in a position to help any of the families we met during our time in Gaza, please contact us at info@tuesdayschild.co.uk or [donate online](#)

[Continues to Day 8 »](#)

Tuesday's Child Blog

Tuesday's Child Returns to Gaza – Day 8

Monday 13th July 2009

I waken at 7 a.m. and have internet access this morning again. It is good to be back in touch with the outside world and catch up. I receive an email from Cochacamba in Bolivia confirming receipt of transfer of funds to support abandoned children in Solomon Klein home with milk, fruit, vegetables and kindergarden teaching fees. I am pleased with how the work of Tuesday's Child is reaching children in different parts of the world, even though we are still only 2 yrs old and, as NGOs go, child-like in size comparison. I am also pleased that we still manage to donate 100 percent of everything received.

This morning, my plan is to go to the Ministry to request permission to visit the three paediatric hospitals in Gaza as well as the paediatric and neonatal units in the main acute Shifa hospital. My own early early background is in neonatal and paediatric pharmacy and I am also interested in seeing the quality of service provision in these areas. I thought it was only a matter of contacting each hospital Director directly, however, I learn that I require a letter of permission from the Ministry for Health for such visits to be possible. I ask Him for extra assistance this morning to help me.

Nazem kindly offers to introduce me to the people I need to speak to. Nazem owns a pharmaceutical company in Gaza city and has good contacts in the health industry here. He is a gentleman and one who holds the respect of all who know him, regardless of their affiliation. He assures me that permission should not be a problem and that the Ministry will only be too grateful for support from Ireland for sick children here.

The Ministry is a busy building with people coming and going in all directions. We knock on the door of Dr Al-Kashif, General Director for Hospitals, and he welcomes us. He asks a lot of questions about Tuesday's Child, the nature of our work in Gaza and why we wish to visit children in the hospitals. I tell him we have been helping children in Gaza since November 2007, also of my own background in health-care and of the supplies of toys and sweets we have brought for children here. I give him samples of the toys and I note the first thing he does is check them thoroughly; security is paramount. He asks, how, with little Arabic, I can possibly communicate with children and people generally and assess the health needs here. I tell him, that 70 percent of communication is non-verbal and he laughs, acknowledging his awareness of this, after all he is an ophthalmologist, he explains. I think of the letter last night of the two little children needing eye surgery to correct their congenital disorder.

He introduces me to his Director of Pharmacy Services who shares her vision of clinical pharmacy services for Gaza. She is intelligent and informed and is gleaning much information from other areas. However, it is clear, that there is a fundamental error here, the same error that health administrations around the world have made, a focus on secondary care clinical services. Ultimately, the first focus should be on primary care, for if you can get this right, it will ultimately reduce the burden and financial load on limited secondary care



services and resources. She mentions a clinical pharmacist in Ireland who has proved helpful to the work of the new ministry in Gaza and asks me if I know her. While I know many, the name does not ring a bell and I tell her I do not, as indeed it is some 3 yrs now since I was made redundant from my national post in the Irish Health Service Executive (HSE). I reflect on that time for a moment and the disappointment of it, on the quality, excellence and level of clinical governance in the service therein, on the shallow boardroom games and politics that went with the territory, the persistent bullying and the shabbiness of what is now on offer instead, a pity really. Nonetheless, I would not return to it, not for twice the salary. I am infinitely more fulfilled in my current unsalaried role. I also reflect on a statement from the fabulous Mary Robinson to former President and buck eejit George Bush, "*I came to do a job, not keep a job*" and it makes me smile. She made reference to it in a Q and A forum following her speech on the UN Declaration of Human Rights at Queen's in Belfast. Nonetheless, I do not regret the years spent in shaping good practice in my remit of promoting public well-being and I hope that, even some, benefited as a result. Strange, that this clinically focused pharmacist in Gaza should bring me back to it, for I have not thought about my former role for quite some time. She leaves for a moment and returns with a copy of the essential drugs list for Gaza. I always prefer the word medicines, however, to drugs. She inquires again as to my pharmacy background and I tell her simply clinical pharmacy and risk management of prescribing. She explains that she will be recruiting fresh graduates from the university for rolling out clinical pharmacy services here. I consider the approach flawed, surely, for good clinical practice only comes with a foundation of experience gained from learning from many patients and different disciplines and a thorough orientation under the shadow of more experienced peers.

Dr Al-Kashif asks me to send him a letter in and he will consider my request to visit the 4 hospitals. He reminds Nazem and me that we do not have an appointment with him this morning and that he is very busy. I take responsibility for this and explain that I am not *au fait* with protocol here and also that my time is limited and I would prefer to write the letter now, if at all possible. He says he does not have time as he has a meeting and asks if I can submit a letter to his department on our headed paper. I explain that I do not carry our official stationery with me on field visits, only business cards, however, I would be very happy to write a letter now and it will only take a few moments. And so, he permits me to write a letter in his office. My persistence does not go unmarked, although he attributes it to Irish charm. He is in a rush to a meeting with "*his excellency the Minister for Health*" and approves my request with a signature before leaving, giving it to his staff to process. I wait in his office and once the letter in Arabic is ready, I leave, also leaving sample toys and a kiddie toothbrush on his desk. His staff are efficient and the required letter of introduction to the respective hospital managers is given to me within 5 minutes of his approval. I could like this man and warm to him, if it were not for the cruel regime he is part of for it is not just Israel who breach the human rights of civilians in Gaza.

I thank Nazem for the kind introduction to Dr Al-Kashif, bid farewell for now and make arrangements to schedule visits to all 4 hospitals into my busy timetable for the coming week. I hope to start with one of the hospitals today, but am told morning times are better, so I will have to wait until tomorrow.

I return and do a head count of the bears, dolls and many other toys. I note that I have already distributed many of the toys I brought during home visits to families and, randomly, to children I have met. I do a second toy headcount and have only about 150 left, not enough for children in 4 hospitals and so I enquire about toy shops in Gaza to replenish our supplies. We have some families to visit this afternoon and after that, I will go shopping, as shops here are open until about 7 p.m. I would also like to buy some quality footballs,

basketballs and also basketball nets.

I have some unplanned time now and use it to interview some more young people, this time, those starting out in their careers and finishing their studies in their chosen fields. I am interested in their views and where they see Gaza going.

My first interview is with Shadi, also a pharmacist. I ask him in his own words, to tell me his story, his experience of the war and of his hopes for the future. His English is almost fluent. *“I am 25 yrs old and qualified as a pharmacist. I am newly married as of last week and my wife is also a pharmacist; we met at university. Our marriage has brought great happiness after a time of great worry and heartache. I was born in Libya and have one brother and 4 sisters; I have lived in Gaza since I was a child. My family home was damaged in an attack by 2 F16s and my father was injured, his arm and hand both hurt, in the same attack. All of the windows and doors in our home were destroyed but otherwise the house is ok, unlike many of our neighbours whose homes were completely destroyed. I have travelled to Egypt and Jordan but the last time I left Gaza was 14 yrs ago in 1995. I tried to leave Gaza to go to university abroad but it was not possible. I would like to travel the world and also start a family. We always had a reasonable standard of living, as my father had a good job as director of education for child development and for children with disabilities programme. Gaza has huge needs at the moment. The infrastructure is in need of repair for some years – water services, roads, electricity services – all civil services really were in gross disrepair before the war and now are almost obliterated. Sanitation services are a particular problem currently and lack of these is a health risk to many. The strip also needs huge investment in terms of money and ongoing humanitarian relief. The spirit of the people is very low, many are broken and people have lost all sense of security and personal safety. Unemployment is high and there is a huge need for job creation and development of young people. I am hopeful that the blockade will end and this black spot will leave us. I am still shocked and heartbroken about this attack on our country. This was a civilian assault on the people of Palestine, it was not about a war against Hamas. What is most disappointing of all is the deepening divide between the two parties here and their supporters, for we will never have a future unless Palestinian factions of Hamas and Fatah unite. The leaders of each, need to shake hands and come around one table, a table of power-sharing. We need union not division if Gaza is to survive”.*



Shadi, 25 yrs old, pharmacist

I thank Shadi for sharing his thoughts and experience and it is the same view I have come across when speaking to many this week. For Gaza has never been more polarised and in this, Israel has achieved its goal in, not only annihilating Gaza, but dividing the people here. My greatest fear for Palestine is, that unless Palestinian factions unite, there may be civil war and even more suffering and that would be a catastrophe. I had hoped after such a heinous war, Palestinians would have forgotten their differences and come together in the best interests of their future and of an independent Palestinian state.



Rasha, 21 yrs old, studying engineering and graphic design

My next interview is with 21 yr old Rasha, from Gaza city. *“My name is Rasha and I am studying engineering. I have 5 sisters and 2 brothers. I lived in Saudi Arabia for 6 yr, between the age of 6 and 12 yrs. It was a lovely place to live – happy, safe and free and I am fortunate that I had that experience, even for a short time. I am very saddened and, well, heartbroken about the recent war here, and all of the incursions that preceded it also. Life is very difficult for people here, it is a miserable situation and there has been too much death. Thankfully, all of my family are safe. I was at university on 27th December when the war started, it was a horrible day and one I will never forget. The sky was full of fighter planes and helicopters, looking out of the university, there must have been at least 20 in the sky above firing indiscriminately on the area below. It was terrifying. There were no phones or internet access or electricity, everything stopped and everyone was panicking and there was no guarantee of arriving home safely. The bombs continued to fall hard and there was also constant shelling from the sea. We had to leave our home as it was not safe and go and live in our Uncle’s house. There was no comfort there, very little food or water and it was impossible to sleep. Thankfully, all my family our safe but our home is badly damaged – all the windows and doors are broken and the internal walls are all damaged; also the roof. And this is how it still is, now 6 months on, as it is not possible to get materials to fix the damage. It is miserable and very depressing. I want to travel abroad and I would like to go to the United Arab Emirates to complete my studying and to live and work there. I do not want to remain in Gaza, there is no work here and no future. I hope that the blockade will end soon but this needs unity between the Palestinian people. I think there is much more unity between our generation than the older generation and it is essential in order to achieve peace. Here families who support Hamas and families who support Fatah, must come together. The reality is that many families don’t want to know about either, they are completely disillusioned with both. I think the young people of Palestine have more vision, they can see that unity is essential for us to move forward and have a future but the older generation here are set in their ways and will not permit that. They are destroying any chance of a future for their children and young people, for by refusing to settle their differences they are robbing us of our future”.*



Asmaa, 22 yrs old, studying engineering and architecture

My last interview is with Asmaa, also from Gaza City. “My name is Asmaa, I am 22 yrs old and I am studying construction engineering. I have 6 brothers and 4 sisters. I live in Gaza with one of my brothers, the rest of my family is in the United Arab Emirates and we hope to join them soon. I was in university when the war started, it was crazy, we were being bombed from all directions. My brother and I left the university together and made it to our grandmother’s home and stayed with her for the duration of the war. There has been so much death and destruction and many students were killed. Many here are still confused. People cannot concentrate or make decisions, they are bewildered and are going around in circles. People go outside their homes and it is as if they don’t know what to do or where to go. They are still in shock and cannot think for themselves and many are exhausted, the stress and the trauma. Gaza, needs leadership and there is none here, politically the country has never been more divided. This is the saddest, the lack of unity here now. I do not want to stay in Gaza. There is no future here for me here. I am one of the lucky ones as I have a visa. I will hopefully live in the United Arab Emirates with the rest of my family. I would like to travel and see the world. I would like to visit Italy and Malaysia. Italy especially, as the architecture is so beautiful”.

I thank Rasha and Asmaa for their insights and wish them good luck with the rest of their studies and for the future. The over-riding theme from the three interviews is the need for unity between Palestinian factions. It is clear from many of the families we meet that they are sick of the politics here, many in Gaza don’t want to know about either Hamas or Fatah, they are fed up with the lack of hope that both options currently offer. Clearly, a new, all embracing, political solution is needed.

I return to the hotel to take a break from the heat and prepare for the home visits this afternoon. I cannot eat the hotel food, indeed I can eat very little. I bought some bread, cheese and nutella yesterday and more soft drinks as the water is definitely dodgy and so I have two pittas, one with cheese, one with nutella and a can of strange tasting 7UP, that clearly came through the tunnels. This has been my diet for the last few days and there is very little fresh fruit here to buy. Still, it is much more than many people have to eat here.

Our first stop this afternoon is to one of the older cemeteries in Gaza city to meet the Fahtma El Mokabry family of 20 people, refugees who have been living here for 20 yrs. In Gaza, unlike in neighbouring Egypt, people are not permitted to live in cemeteries. This family is the exception. The Palestinian Authority has tried to move them on many times, but they remain, stating that this is their home and they have nowhere else to go.



Fahtma El Moukraby family living in cemetery



Home in cemetery



Some of the El Moukraby children who live in the cemetery

The extended family live here with the wives and children of Fathma's sons. He husband is mentally ill and also disabled. Inside, she shows me around her home and the damage sustained during the war. Their refugee status permits

the children to attend UNRWA schools and access food allocations there. In the kitchen, her eldest daughter is making pastry and I notice a sewing machine in the main entrance area, clearly in use. We give her cash assistance towards the needs of the large extended family. It is a grim environment for children to grow up in and I wonder what it must be like for a child to have a cemetery as their garden and playground. The children are delighted with the sweets and, as with all children I have met here, they are very polite.

We say good-bye to the graveyard children and drive to a very different area, the middle class area of Tall El Haw in South West Gaza. Initially, as we drive, it looks as if it has escaped the obliteration of other areas until we turn into a main area where homes and high rises are completely decimated. We pass a large park where over 200 tanks parked during the war before causing mass destruction and then onto a large apartment building, hit by 19 rockets.



Apartment block in Tall El Haw destroyed by 19 rockets where many people died



Another bombed apartment block in Tall El Haw



Remains of large apartment block



More bombed apartments

Again, the direct bombing of so many apartment blocks in this large residential area confirms that Operation Cast Lead was directed towards civilians.

Many people in this area repeatedly called the Red Cross and the other hospitals for assistance but no help could get through for over 24 hrs and many bled to death on the streets. It is estimated that 500 people lost their lives in this part of Gaza, the loss of life greatly exacerbated by the inability of emergency services to access the dying.

In this area, the famous Arafat Al-Quds hospital, also under siege. The hospital was bombed and shelled and went up in flames. Physicians evacuated patients from the hospital and lay them on mattresses in the road outside while Israeli forces made them move people back into the burning building. They said that anyone leaving the hospital would be shot. One man, in defiance, of their treatment walked straight out onto the street and they shot him through the head. Here, healthcare workers and ambulance drivers were killed and tanks rammed ambulances and crushed them. And again, they say this was not a civilian attack.



Al Quds Hospital

A physician here shows me a video he made of the hospital under attack with flames pouring from the roof and the main wing, the people killed and the sheer devastation caused. It is hard to believe. I am shocked. Outside the hospital the remnants of ambulances chewed up by tanks are still evident. How could they possibly not have seen they were ambulances? What was the excuse this time? That Hamas militia were driving ambulances? It is nauseating. To attack a hospital full of sick people, healthworkers and emergency vehicles – it doesn't get much lower than this.



Al Quads Hospital



Main foyer of former hospital 6 months on



View from entrance to hospital 6 months on



Children's playground in grounds of hospital



Ambulance crushed by an Israeli tank



Another ambulance also rammed by an Israeli tank



Front view of ambulance above

I have worked in 5 hospitals in my time, 2 in London, 1 in Edinburgh and 2 in Ireland. I simply cannot envisage any of these coming under similar attack even in a war situation. Yes, Belfast, had it's moments, but not an onslaught like this.

We drive on to meet our next family, new to the feeding programme since the war. We pass the area where another body was found on Monday under the rubble.



Area where a body found under the rubble a few days ago

We stop to pick up a lady who is coming with us on our next family visit, a friend of the family, and as, wherever we stop, even for a few moments, children gather. We give sweets and they are delighted. One of these children however is carrying a make believe gun that, from a distance, looks quite realistic. I ask him what he is doing and he says that he and his friends are defending their area. A tragic game of make believe and the reality for children living with violence. I think back to my own childhood, where the kids in our house, joined forces with the local Methodist minister's 4 children, who lived in our avenue in Lisburn. We called our group the Parkmount Defence Regiment (PDR), a harmless gathering, but nonetheless children absorb their environment. I offer to swap his gun for a football and a colouring book and crayons, but he would rather keep his gun. As we drive along. I notice, another child, even younger, pointing a toy gun out of a car window.



Children of the Tall El Haw area



With sweets and a make believe gun that he refuses to trade for a football



Another child points a make believe gun

The next family we visit this afternoon is the Niveen family. Unlike, many we have visited so far, they have a nice home, yet the suffering here is as raw. They are new to the feeding programme, since the war. Mrs Niveen is now a widow, her husband was killed while evacuating families from their building,

on 15th January, when it came under attack. He was hit by a rocket and decapitated, she witnessed his death and it plays over and over in her mind. She has received no psychological support or counselling, her own family live a distance away in Rafah and her mother is sick. The only support she has is from the lady we picked up en route, her friend. Her husband had already evacuated all his own children to a UNRWA school and returned to help others trapped in the building. Up until that, the family had no food, as it was impossible to get out and there was very little drinking water. A photo of their father hangs in the centre of the living room wall. *“I miss my husband so much”, she says, “he was a good man, a loving husband and father, my life is empty without him and we have no source of income now. The children miss him so much, they cry for him even the little ones, and they cannot understand why he had to die, especially when he was helping others. There is no way they could not have seen him evacuating the people here, they were quite close when they fired the direct hit”*. I ask the children about school and what subjects they like. Nadim, who is 13 yrs old, says her favourite subject is art and she would like to study design later. Mahmoud, the eldest, at 15 yrs, likes most things and would like to be a doctor, Fatima, 11 yrs enjoys arabic and science most and would like to be an engineer. Namie, 7 yrs old, likes science also and wants to be a doctor and 10 yr old Mohammed wants to be a teacher. The youngest children are 3 yr old Reda and the baby Ahmed, 19 months. I ask how long the food lasts and she says about 12-14 days, other neighbours help for the remainder. The poor lady is grief-stricken. I tell her I think she is coping very well, under the circumstances, her home is lovely and the children are all looking well and she is pleased. We give the children a football and will return with other things for them.



The Niveen family who lost their father on 15th January 2009



Family man Mohammed Niveen, killed while evacuating other families from his building

Time now for more toy shopping to replenish our supplies and we visit three different shops this evening. There are a few toy shops in Gaza and also that things like colouring books and crayons are available to purchase. Recent reports say that crayons and books for children have been refused access to the strip, however, we find there is no shortage here; perhaps they came through the tunnels.



Selection of toys purchased from one shop

The third shop we visit has an excellent range of colouring books and crayons and we take much of their stock, for we still have to visit the children in the tents as well.



Colouring books and crayons

I get back to the hotel about 10 p.m...I will get up early and sort the toys in the morning! The Niveen family are still on my mind. I cannot begin to imagine this woman's trauma and grief. To see her husband's head blown off while he is helping others, and to be left to bring up 7 children on her own with no money or family support, and only the kindness of a solitary friend to help her through. The things we worry about. Every family here seems to have some trauma and a story to tell. No one has escaped this war unscathed. I ask God to watch over her and her family and look after them. I also pray that the vision of the young people I met today, one of unity and peace between all Palestinian people, may be fully realised. I also give thanks for her family sponsor, Mary Ryan.

I lift volume 3 of Direction for Our Times, God speaks to his children and I open at *"It is I, the Father of All, who speaks to this small soul. I wish to give My children both notice and direction. If you are following Me, continue to follow me, but in a more dedicated fashion. Ask yourself on this day, what can I do for my Father in heaven? I will put an answer into your heart, little souls, and you will have My request...for those souls who are not following Me, but who understand they must change, begin by prayer....souls who are working against Me, I speak to you now with the greatest of gravity. You know who you are and you understand that you have pitted yourself against all that is Light. You must cease now.....I see all. I will judge every action. I will reward every decision made by one soul for the benefit of the other. In the same way, I will challenge every decision made to the detriment of another. Children, all is being recorded. You will account for your life"*.

I pray that all those working in the Middle East to promote darkness and injustice have a change of heart and cease their persecution of others. Their activities make the world a very unsafe place for every child and we will never have world peace without peace in God's beloved Middle East.

If you are in a position to help any of the families we met during our time in Gaza, please contact us at info@tuesdayschild.co.uk or [donate online](#)

[Continues to Day 9 »](#)

Tuesday's Child Blog

Tuesday's Child Returns to Gaza – Day 9

Tuesday 14th July 2009

I get up at 6 a.m. this morning to sort the toys for the hospital visits. The water is cold as it has been every morning. I am used to washing my hair in it now, although it would be nice, even one morning to have some hot water. Again, the things we take for granted. The word of the toy room in the hotel seems to have spread since last night and three staff call on me this morning to see if there is anything I need. As per last night, I give each some toys and sweets for their children. Breakfast is served to the room today although all I can manage, as each morning, a little dry bread and black tea.

Looking out my window onto the beach, I notice an older group of boys are already running on the beach in twos, in their bare feet. I admire their discipline; they are doing circuits and it is good to see, as many I have met, in my 9 days, seem too fatigued and undernourished to walk any distance let alone run. I wish some of the young men and women I have met in their homes, still lying in their beds near lunchtime would embark on a similar exercise programme. However, I realise, many are still traumatised and overwhelmed by the suffering here and it is hard to have energy when you haven't had breakfast and there is very little for lunch. I divide the toys into different age-groups for boys and girls and also the baby blankets and rattles for new babies.



Tuesday's Child's toys for hospitals

My lift arrives at 9 a.m. My driver today is Ouni, Ahmed's brother and it is great to see him again. Ouni looked after me during my last visit to Gaza. He is good fun albeit a bit crazy behind the wheel and I know filming today will be more difficult! He and his wife have just had their 4th baby, a little girl, now 4 days old. We load the toys and sweets into the car. These are simply a gesture to the children. Hopefully, when we visit the hospitals, we can assess their needs and see how else we can help in terms of provision of supplies. Ouni speaks of the war, the constant pounding and the never-ending wakefulness and the fear of

sleeping. Both neighbours and friends were killed and he gives thanks that he and his family are safe. Incredible, the faith of many of these people and their constant thanks and praise of God, in spite of all they have endured, it is as if, the destruction of their civilisation here has drawn them closer to Him.

We are welcomed at Al-Nassr hospital by the Medical Director and Consultant Paediatrician, Dr Anwar. He thanks me for our visit and invites me to his office for tea. He gives me background to, and details of, the hospital and hands me part of a rocket from his desk that came into one of the paediatric wards. It must weigh 30 kg, too heavy to hold in one hand. He shows me pictures of the hospital during the war, the damage caused and again this underlines the indiscriminate nature of Operation Cast Lead, for bombing and shelling hospitals full of sick children is despicable. What did these little children do to warrant it? *“The hospital was hit in two separate strikes, 49 windows were broken and glass was everywhere, landing on the children in their beds. We evacuated two departments completely and also a number of the wards”,* he explains. *“The children were very afraid, some even ran out of the hospital and found their way home, incredible that they are still alive and how they ever found their way home in the mayhem, quite incredible. Al- Nassr hospital deals with chronic diseases, most of the acute injuries in the war were taken to Shifa hospital although many brought dead and injured children here. The main problem for children with chronic illness during the war, is that there was no transport available during the weeks of the war and people were staying in their houses with their sick children rather than bringing them to hospital. This meant that some children were presenting very late on in their illness e.g. meningitis and we had deaths because when children did finally present it was too late to intervene; also meningitis-induced necrosis requiring amputations, that may have been avoided had the children been able to get here sooner. Official mortality statistics during this war against civilians do not take into account other deaths resulting from the repercussions of the war and the environment”.*



Part of a rocket that came into one of the paediatric wards

I ask about the most common conditions in children presenting to the hospital, currently. *“We have 350 cases admitted per day to our casualty department”,* he explains. *“The most common problems are acute gastroenteritis, chest infections and meningitis. Meningitis is too common in Gaza and recently it has been reaching epidemic proportions. Other conditions we see commonly are anaemia in about 60 percent of all children and also rickets, due to lack of adequate nutrition across the population. There is little or no fresh meat, fresh milk or fresh fruit and the lack of these important foods is causing problems. The diet is high in carbohydrate and fat and low in protein and essential vitamins and minerals. About 10 percent of children have stunted growth. We also see a lot of inborn errors of metabolism however we have no facilities for a metabolic laboratory in Gaza and this makes management difficult. And there is a high incidence of*

congenital birth defects given the close sanguinity from close marriage here”.

I inquire as to neonatal intensive care here and am alarmed to learn that there is no full total parenteral nutrition here (TPN) in Gaza and no surfactant for pre-term infants with respiratory distress syndrome. Such prescriptions are routinely available in the UK and Ireland and indeed in Israel. *“We only have partial TPN here and this was a problem also during the war as many women went into early labour. Many women also lost their babies due to a much higher rate of miscarriage during the war; the official death figures from direct assault do not take into consideration the increase in indirect mortality”*, Dr Anwar explains. I simply cannot imagine neonatal care without full TPN or surfactant therapy.

I ask how the hospital manages for funding. *“This is a very poor community, there is no money and so we try to help as much as we can”*, Dr Anwar explains. *“We rely on donations from NGOs and other organisations and paediatric hospitals in other countries help us with equipment, medicines, cereals and milk”*. I ask about childhood vaccinations. *“These are supplied by the WHO but we only have vaccination against haemophilus influenza, there is no vaccination against pneumococcus or meningitis in Gaza”*.

Dr Anwar explains that he has to go and teach junior doctors about neonatal resuscitation and refers me to one of his other consultants for a tour of the hospital and to distribute toys. However, he will send on photos of the hospital under attack and some of the children. I thank Dr Anwar for his time, he is clearly very professional and very committed to the children in his care. I guess with no full TPN or medicines such as surfactant, the need for infant resuscitation is much more frequent here.



Our tour starts with the acute admission wards and these are overloaded with children with acute infections, mainly gastroenteritis and chest infections. The accompanying paediatricians feel that many of these infections are related to contamination of filtered water and also the burden of lack of adequate sewage systems. Every bed we visit, mothers and family are also present and they help in the care of the children as staff are clearly over-stretched. Everywhere, mothers are bathing hot children with cool cloths. One little boy is really struggling, completely saturated and on oxygen, his respirations are very high and his breathing very shallow. *“We cannot identify, some of the pathogens and are seeing some quite unusual fevers”*, the consultant explains. I ask about the gastroenteritis and if it is coming from the sewage-rich sea. *“Some of it is being picked up in the sea, but it is everywhere, the pollution, it is in the environment. The sewage is a big problem, also the garbage”*. There are no civil services here to collect garbage and trucks are broken.



Little boy recovering from meningitis

The toys and sweets are very welcome and as we go round, little faces light up with the unexpected gifts and sweets. Many children however, are beyond being able to play with toys and are much too sick. Everywhere we go, mothers are very appreciative and staff ask for toys for their own children. I will have to go shopping again! I use my alco-gel from room to room and ward to ward noting that there are no standard infection control or clean hands programmes here.



Little boy receives a toy truck

As we walk along one of the main corridors, a door bangs loudly, and everyone around me jumps out of their skin or crouches down. I am taken aback by the reaction, for it did not affect me nor did I even think twice about the loud bang, recognising it for what it was, a door slamming in the wind, as I walk ahead of the now dispersed group. Clearly, hospital staff here are still very nervy and jumpy and their response brings it home just how battered people's nervous systems are.



With consultant paediatricians at Al Nassr hospital

We visit one ward where there are many very sick children. Everyone here has meningitis and they are very sick, explains the consultant. They are so very ill, every bed is a picture of struggle for survival. This is a first for me for I have never seen so many children with meningitis before, at the most maybe one child in isolation, but so many, it is hard to fathom. I ask for the statistics on child mortality for meningitis across Gaza and they offer to send them on. It is hard to believe that any country could bomb a hospital full of children, not once, but twice. *“It was very clear the building was a hospital, we flew the hospital flag and also the flag of the red crescent”*, one physician explains. If this happened in any other country there would be an international outcry.



Little girl with meningitis



Little boy recovering from acute gastroenteritis

We are also taken on a tour of the A & E department; it is crowded, there are children everywhere, many crying and the sweets are very welcome here. The staff are overloaded, doctors and nurses going between several children at a time and the statistic of 350 children per day hits home. It is crazy.

The hospital itself is rundown, under-funded and badly in need of modernisation and better equipment. Also, there is little to suggest this is a paediatric hospital, unlike the many colourful and children's themes in paediatric hospitals at home. I think of the clown doctors who visit children in Dublin's paediatric hospitals; they could really do with them here! I am curious to see the pharmacy and the medicines they have. Also the neonatal unit, but we are out of time. I thank the doctors and nurses of Al-Nassr hospital for their time. Some children run after us to the car looking for new toys and more sweets or to change existing toys to something else. As we drive out of the hospital children and parents run alongside the car hopeful for more toys and sweets!

We drive to the second paediatric hospital. It is now 12.15 p.m. and again today the temperature reaches 42 degrees. My face feels like it is melting. This hospital is the El Dorah paediatric hospital, first opened in 2000 and situated about 500 metres from the border with Israel. Here we are welcomed by the hospital director Dr Maged Hamada. El Dorah hospital is so called after a young boy, Mohammed El Dorah, who was shot in 2000 by occupying forces while in the arms of his father who pleaded for mercy, but he was killed regardless. In an attempt to cover up the murder, occupying forces put a skull cap on the boy's head and attempted to claim he was a Jewish boy killed by Palestinian militia. A picture depicting the dying boy hangs in the wall of the hospital office, a 8 yr old martyr. That is a recurrent theme here in Gaza, twisting of events to cover tracks in advance of media coverage.



Dr Maged, Director of El-Dorah Paediatric Hospital

Outside the entrance, pictures of 5 hospital workers who were killed here in the hospital during Operation Cast Lead, including an ambulance driver. International humanitarian law provides that occupying forces must ensure the safety and well-being of the civilian population, yet this hospital was attacked on 3 separate occasions, 3rd, 12th and 13th January 2009, respectively. Dr Majed hands me two pages of pictures of the damage to the hospital during these two weeks. The pictures are horrific and incredible that more people were not killed here. *“This hospital always suffers during any incursion, as we are so close to the border”*, he explains, *“We flew the red crescent flag and they ignored it; we were attacked by air and land troops. Apart from 7 of our workers, one baby in ICU died due to power failure and subsequent generator failure. A pregnant woman who was in labour, was hit by a shell and she and her baby were both killed. Imagine coming into a hospital to give birth to a new life only to lose both lives in such a violent manner”*. Many of these stories here, never made the headlines. He shows me a selection of the remnants of war, collected around the wards of the hospital.



Hospital staff killed during 3 attacks on El-Dorah hospital



Fragments of war collected from the El-Dorah hospital building



Explosive that killed mother and child during labour in El Dorah



Bullet cartridge from paediatric ward

I ask about current presentations of children. *“The most common presentations are gastroenteritis and chest infections and we estimate that the incidence of children coming in with severe diarrhoea has increased by over 100 percent since February. Children are also presenting with fever and we are unable to source the cause or the pathogen. We are also seeing a marked increase in meningitis*

and severe asthma. Child mortality from asthma increased during the war. We had a number of fatal asthmatic attacks, both on admission and as in-patients. There is also considerable concern now about the increased incidence of cancers in children, of all types, we refer these cases to Al-Nassr; these together with increased blood dyscrasias are raising questions about levels of radioactivity here”, Dr Maget explains. “We also see a lot of congenital heart disease, epilepsy and other neurological diseases and metabolic diseases; incidences of these are high here because of poverty and close sanguinity. In terms of paediatric nutrition we see too much anaemia, rickets and failure to thrive”.

Two paediatricians join us and there is a lengthy discussion as to the limitations with which they have to work and the needs of the hospital to treat children adequately. *“We have a shortage of medicines for children, we lack diagnostic equipment, there is no MRI scanner and we have no facilities for transfer for specialist opinion and intervention. There are also no facilities for therapeutic drug monitoring of medicines with a narrow therapeutic range such as anti-epileptics”,* one of them explains. *“We also have cases that need immediate transfer for treatment. We have one little boy, Mohammed Mushtaha, he is 7 yrs old and he has myasthenia gravis. He is in extreme respiratory difficulty and needs urgent referral for treatment of pulmonary fibrosis. His older 3 siblings have already died of the condition here in Gaza and his younger brothers Mamoud and Ahmed, aged 5 yrs and 2 yrs also have the rare familial disorder. Mohammed’s case is the most urgent, he needs immediate referral. Every day we refer to Israel and every day they ignore our request”.* I offer to take a photo of Mohammed and help raise awareness of his plight, however, he is at home today. His physician says he would be delighted for any help and promises to send a photograph on to me. I also suggest approaching Amnesty International to help make a case for this little boy who must be terrified that he is going to die like his older siblings. The paediatricians here say they have no access to outside agencies such as Amnesty International.



Consultant paediatricians working in difficult conditions at El-Dorah



Mohammed, aged 7yrs, refused urgent transfer for treatment of respiratory failure from congenital myasthenia gravis

It must be very difficult to practice in such conditions. I cannot imagine for example, how a paediatrician or neurologist can treat epilepsy effectively without access to therapeutic drug monitoring facilities, this is out of the ark and puts the child with epilepsy at considerable risk. As for Mohammed, I would like to try and help this little boy before I leave Gaza, for even if I can help save the life of this child, the trip will have been worthwhile.

We discuss the most recent war and the loss of life here again. The deaths of so many children is clearly a cause of great hurt and sadness to these paediatricians. The murder of innocent children has to stop and every citizen has a responsibility to do what they can to stop this brutality. I reflect on my trip last year, when I was told what was happening in Gaza is a slow genocide and they are targeting the children. Operation Cast Lead claiming the lives of 404 children (28%) is by far the most fatal incursion to date. The world has not moved on from the slaughter of innocents some 2000 years ago and I wonder have we come full circle. These figures for child deaths are for direct trauma and do not take into account deaths in children from other events precipitated by war e.g. asthma, epilepsy, preterm birth, meningitis, diarrhoea.

Dr Maged takes us on a tour of the hospital and we give out gifts to some very excited little children. It is amazing how something as small as a toy or sweets can brighten a child. Children love to give and they love to receive even more. Parents ask us for toys for their other children and staff also for their children, we are inundated. Again, I am very impressed with the paediatricians here, they are very committed to the children in their care. As we walk around, I notice the

damage to the hospital still and the bullet holes in the walls.



Bullet holes in wall of paediatric ward



View of Israeli border from El-Dorah hospital



Little boy recovering from meningitis who chooses colouring book and crayons



Little girl, also with meningitis, who chooses a doll



Infant with acute chest infection

We visit the ICU ward where there are a number of children. We put on gowns but again, I note that there is no infection control here, in the form of hand gel sanitisation. One little girl, here is 4 months old, she suffers from intractable epilepsy and is in need of specialist referral. Again the requests are repeatedly ignored while anxious parents look on. So very cruel. What did this little child do to warrant it, apart from being born in Palestine? It is bullying to the extreme. Big brave men, preventing access to emergency hospital intervention for a little baby girl. It is depraved and the ultimate breach of human rights. Also, one of the things I find most difficult to accept during this trip – large organisations busily collecting evidence of crimes against humanity, and still they continue, breaches are everywhere and there is clear indifference to the inhumanity being perpetrated by those same perpetrators others are trying to hold to account. And still in Gaza, the UN declaration of human rights failing the people here, most of all the children.



4 month old Heloi, who needs immediate transfer to Israel, but refused

We finish at 2.30 p.m. and say good-bye to El-Dorah. So far, today have given out about 250 toys. I will definitely have to go shopping again as we have two more hospitals to visit as well as the camps, not the refugee camps but the many tents of displaced families. It is clear from today, how much children suffered in this recent war and indeed throughout the incursions by occupied forces. Both of these hospitals today are in great need and the most important help we can give is to try and raise awareness for the plight of these children needing transfer. Also the urgent need for intensive care medicines and drug assay materials. I also make a note to look into the possibility of sourcing vaccination against meningitis.

We leave Gaza about 3.30 p.m. for Rafah, the city close to the border with Egypt. While we do not feed families this far south, I am curious to see the tunnels. I would also like to see this side of the Rafah border and the area we should've crossed in February, a few weeks after the war, when we were not permitted access with a medical team, medical supplies, medicines and children's supplies.

We stop in Khanounis to collect Sabah and drive on towards Rafah. We pick up two guys who work on the tunnels en route. One has just finished tunnel work to take a job with the summer games and one is still working on the tunnels. Both are friends of Ouni's and hopefully our ticket into even one of the tunnels. There are 2,200 tunnels in Gaza, 1400 of which are currently active. *"Tunnel work pays well and I can earn up to 50 US dollars per day for this kind of work. It is dangerous, but worth it"*, explains one *"and it will pay my way through college"*. I think back to the first day of our attempt to cross Rafah in February and the Israeli F16s bombing the area of the tunnels, dangerous work indeed! I think back to Rafah and tell Sabah and Ouni, that I would gladly have come in through a tunnel if I could have found one and they laugh! They may have had to give me an injection of something, like the lion, but yes, I would've considered it!

Rafah city itself is bustling and there are many street stalls here selling their wares. Shops seem to be much better stocked than in Gaza city, possibly because of the close proximity to the tunnels. However, the people of Rafah, as in all of Gaza have suffered through this war and for many years before it. Rafah, is also the scene of the murders of young international peace activists, 23 yr old Rachel Corrie in March 2003 and 21 yr old Tom Hurndall in January 2004. Rachel Corrie was killed when demonstrating against a house demolition of the home belonging to a local pharmacist. As we drive through Rafah, I reflect on her words a short time before she was murdered. *"I feel I am witnessing the systematic destruction of people's ability to survive....sometimes I sit down to dinner with people and I realise there is a massive military machine surrounding us, trying to kill the people I am having dinner with"*, Rachel said. Six years on, her words remain accurate, except the killing has become more blatant and aggressive. Here too, Tom Hurndall, photographer and peace activist in the same movement as Rachel,

was murdered, trying to save children caught in crossfire. Tom and Rachel apart, many Gazans have been killed in Rafah, over the years. In this most recent war, northern Gaza has sustained the greatest loss of life.



Rafah city



Family selling corn on street corner in Rafah

The tunnels start 500 metres this side of Rafah and go 1500 metres into Egypt. That would explain why I couldn't find any at Rafah, I was far too close to the border and when I was walking around the fields there, I was probably standing above several. It's quite a long distance across 1500 meters and the tunnel workers explain how they do it. A small car, I can't remember the make, is taken down to its shell, so wheels, engine and seats and these run along the length of the tunnel. How do they get it down? They take it apart and re-assemble in the main road of the tunnel.



Row of tunnels, each covered area is a tunnel

I have mixed views on the tunnels. Fundamentally, I am against them as they are destroying the economy here and a select few are making a serious amount of money out of the tunnel trade. Fair trade does not apply to the tunnel industry. Also, they are weakening the case for lifting the blockade and better access for humanitarian aid for all. However, speaking to the people on the ground, the tunnels provide a lifeline of food and supplies that is keeping Gaza alive. I think of the words of Ahmed a few days ago, “*without them, we would all be dead*” and there is no doubt about it, they enable more food and more choice to come into Gaza, albeit at higher prices.

One of the tunnel workers tells us about the day he was sent down to pick up a monkey. I told him I heard about the lion but not the monkey and suggest he is pulling my leg, but he insists he is serious. “*It was for the zoo, also*”, he said, “*and they sent me down, but when I went into the tunnel, I couldn’t see the monkey anywhere. I turned around to shout back to the guys that there was no monkey in the tunnel and the next thing it tapped me on the shoulder!*” Now I know he is pulling my leg, but his friend confirms that he did indeed, hand on heart, bring a monkey up from the tunnel. I’m still not convinced.

As we approach the tunnels, there seems no sign of fighter planes or trouble overhead. I ask when the last bombing raid was here and I am told there has been nothing for 2 weeks. Let’s hope it doesn’t start today again! As we drive along, there is tent after tent, rows and rows of them. Sabah explains that each of these tents is the cover of a tunnel. We stop at one, the guys work at occasionally, but the tunnel owner says no to an interview and photographs, as they do not want any coverage of their work or potential exposure of their site. Confidentiality is high on the agenda here and visiting journalists have caused problems. We discuss how much money some of the tunnel owners make here and I joke with Sabah that we should try and buy a Tuesday’s Child tunnel and put the proceeds towards humanitarian relief or else just not charge any mark up and bring whatever we want in – school uniforms, trainers, medicines, foods, good drinking water, lions!

We drive on about 10 minutes to a second tunnel. Here the owners of the tunnel allow us to enter but on the strict agreement that there is no filming or photographs. This is a relatively new tunnel, as it was bombed and destroyed two months ago and several workers were killed. They take us to the shaft of the tunnel and I peer in, to a drop of over 50 meters and no wider than the entrance to my roofspace at home, lined by rows and rows of horizontal wooden slats. Incredible workmanship and quite an architectural feat. I am itching to take out my camera but they say absolutely no or the show is over. They outline how the tunnel works and offer me a seat and a trip down to the bottom. However, it is narrower than a child’s swing and given the 50 meter dark drop below, I chicken

out. They kindly give a demonstration and one guy, sits on the swing, kicks off his shoes, and his colleagues lower him down to the bottom, I watch as he goes the whole way down to the bottom, getting dizzy even watching. It is a bit like ab-sailing really except you have a plank of wood under you as support, the rope pulley controls everything else. I ask what they have brought through today and they say “*flour, rice, lentils, soft drinks and biscuits*”. I talk with the guy who gave the demo and ask him, if he doesn’t find it frightening “*it is a little, the first few times, but then you get used to it and it is routine*”. I ask if it is dangerous, and he says “*yes, ofcourse, many people have been killed here, but what option do we have, without the supplies we bring through, many people would die*”. I ask what he finds the most difficult things to bring up and he says “*for me, sheep and goats*”.



Entrance to a tunnel

I am still keen to get a photo so we go to a third tunnel the guys work at and we are in luck as the tunnel owner is not here for now but we have to be quick as he has only gone on a break. This shaft is not nearly as deep, only a quarter of the depth of the previous so it seems a bit of relative breeze to try out in comparison to the last tunnel. We manage to take a few photos and also a photo coming up from inside the tunnel. As we come out of the tunnel, others come over and ask what is going on, and there are some raised voices. We get into the car and drive away quickly. As we drive, the boys explain that this tunnel is owned by Hamas. Let’s go! Drive!



Tunnel shaft at the Rafah border



Looking up from inside a shaft of a tunnel at the Rafah border

Driving back from the tunnels, I ask if we can go up to the Rafah border as I am curious to see it from the other side of the gate. We drive to the gate and take a photo, it is a far cry from the ornate gate on the Egyptian side. I think back to February and the sheer disappointment of not being allowed to cross this short distance of 1/4 mile after travelling all that way including 5 hrs across the Sinai desert from Cairo. I also think of the doctors and nurses I travelled with and the quietness in the car as we returned for Cairo and of Sabah waiting for me here at this side. Also, of Alan, the journalist who travelled with us and tried so hard to raise media pressure and also the guys in the Irish Embassy in Cairo who were so very helpful and pulled out all the stops. And all to no avail. The Gazan people are very disappointed in the lack of support from their Egyptian neighbours.



Gaza side of the Rafah border

We drive back to Gaza city, dropping the guys home on the way. It doesn't take long with Ouni at the wheel. We stop at a roadside shack barbequeing corn, the first thing I have been able to eat today apart from dry bread. It is very good. On either side of the road, scenes of mass destruction. We pass one building a former community hall for social gatherings and driving into Gaza, what is left of what was the new Ministry for Justice.



Former community hall



Former Ministry of Justice

Time now for more toy shopping! I love buying things for children, and am used to buying in bulk and at hyper fast speed. I think back to one of my very first bulk buys in October 2006, 300 pairs of fleecy pyjamas from Primark for children in Bosnia. People at the check-outs must have thought the old woman in the shoe was on a buying spree. I often get strange looks, “*IVF*” I told one complaining woman once, behind me in the queue in Dunnes Stores , “*it’s a nightmare when it goes wrong; I have 25!*”. We return to two of the three shops we visited yesterday and here in Gaza there are no queues. This time in one, a new item, bubbles of all things, fantastic, so we take all of their stock about 150 bottles. I used to love bubbles when I was little, blowing all shapes and sizes and it is an easy toy for mothers to re-fill. We also take all of the stock of colouring books and crayons tonight, as these are probably one of the best options for the children in the tents, in terms of fun, practicality and longevity. We arrive back to the hotel laden down again much to the amusement of the porters who carry everything upstairs to my room and have a game of football along the corridor as they go.



Ouni helps with the toy shopping

It is now 8.30 p.m. and just time for a quick shower and change before my 9 p.m. meeting with Khalil Shaheen in the foyer. I still have severe diarrhoea and 6 days on it is very weakening. At least the vomiting has stopped. The last time I had something like this was in 2002, a cryptosporidium bug, when the Belfast water system was contaminated by local sewage. I am convinced it is the local bottled water. I am incredibly dehydrated. I will buy some watermelon tomorrow and try that to help rehydrate.

Khalil arrives as planned. It is good to meet this human rights activist whom I kept in touch with during Operation Cast Lead, amazed to receive e-mail in all that was going on. Khalil is Director of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights here in Gaza (www.pchrgaza.org). The work he did throughout the war was quite astounding, keeping regular bulletins and updates going, despite the long hours without electricity. He and his team have also worked hard to collate data since the war and followed-up every death during the days of Operation Cast Lead and since. Much of his work has informed large reports such as the Amnesty International Report on Gaza published on 3rd July 2009. Khalil comments on the similarity of our names, Shaheen and Sheehan, one typically Palestinian, one typically Irish. I much prefer being the latter, I couldn't live without the occasional glass of pino grigio or a bottle of cold Carlsberg!



Khalil Shaheen, Director of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (www.pchrgaza.org)

Just as we start to talk about the human rights breaches here in Gaza, we are interrupted. I have a visitor, Captain and Head of Security of the Ministry of the

Interior - a formal visit from Hamas – it was only a matter of time. He does not ask if he can join us, he simply sits down and starts firing questions after a brief introduction. I explain I have little Arabic and as he has little English, I ask Khalil to kindly translate. He explains that he is Chief of Foreign Security Protection and responsible for the safety of all foreign visitors to Gaza. He tells me he is aware that I was formerly staying in a hotel close by and asks my reason for vacating it and moving to this hotel. He also asks many questions about the nature of my visit to Gaza, the duration of my stay, who I am travelling with and many specific questions in relation to our work in Gaza, to which I give very general answers. I tell him that in addition to our humanitarian work, we also work to increase advocacy to bring an end to the blockade here and for justice and freedom for the people of Gaza. That softens him a tad and finally he thanks me for the advocacy bit and leaves. I am in no way convinced that my safety is remotely enhanced by his visit and stated remit. I know enough to understand that he has not given me his correct and full name for the version given is too informal. Unfortunately, he has already left before I think of asking him as to the whereabouts of Shalit and if there is any chance I can bring him back to Israel with me on Sunday as an ice breaker to lifting the siege.

I continue with my interview with Khalil. We talk at length about Operation Cast Lead, and I know, that in terms of statistics, this will be the one of the most exacting interviews during my visit, for Khalil is incredibly informed. I ask him first of all, about the first day of the war and if he can put into words what the 27th December was like for him.

“At 11.30 a.m. Gaza came under the most terrifying attack; there were 250 military operations in the first 5 minutes from air and sea. The time was quite deliberate to target, firstly, the greatest number of children possible, for 11.30 a.m. is the time when schools change here and literally 2 lots of school-children would’ve been outside schools across the strip. Streams of F16 jets hit all public services and police installations, simultaneously. The noise was deafening and the whole street was quaking. Trees and lamp posts fell were uprooted. People, vehicles and donkeys and carts flew through the air. In one police academy, 50 young policemen graduating and almost all killed within minutes. I was walking to work at 11.30 a.m. and was half way between the Ministry of Finance in front of me and the prison behind me. A friend stopped me to chat and say hello and, had it not been for that chance encounter, I would’ve been 120 metres ahead outside the key target of the finance building. I often think of that friend and how his hello undoubtedly saved my life that morning. Hundreds of children were on the street, rushing and screaming in sheer terror. It was horrific. In front of me, people were flying in the air, over cars and higher than lamp posts, with the sheer force of the bombs and body pieces were tumbling from the sky. I remember one woman specifically, blown high into the sky, her clothes over her head and her underclothes revealed and being struck by the sheer indignity of it, especially for a Palestinian woman who dresses to cover even her arms and head. The ministry of finance was a key bombing site as it was surrounded by a hospital, 4 schools and 5 kindergardens”.

I ask how he managed to keep the work and bulletins from PCHR Gaza going through such an assault. I followed his postings through the war and truly his work was remarkable. *“Friends and colleagues, pressurised me to evacuate our building. I did not want to leave, but they were right. I went to my brother’s house and stayed there as he had a basement. My family and I were there for 17 days with very limited supplies of food and drinking water. There was no electricity and no water for washing and sleep was impossible. My brother’s house is close to where my uncle lives and, as his building has a generator, I went there to work briefly and to recharge my phone and laptop. One day, walking back with my uncle from his building, I was convinced we would both be killed. There were 4 apaches, low down, just above us, 5 drones and F16s swishing everywhere. We agreed to walk separately, 20 feet apart, that way less chance of us both getting killed. My heart was racing and the adrenaline was*

really pumping. An F16 dropped a bomb right beside me, it tore up traffic lights, but amazingly I was not hurt. I fell to the ground in a flash of multi-coloured light. For a moment I thought I had been caught in a white phosphorus bomb and I was gripped with fear. Words cannot describe it. I came very close to death that day. I remember seeing one old woman, the same day, hit with white phosphorus and literally imploding in flames. There was nothing I could do, it was horrific. The white phosphorus seemed to light up the sky before it hit and went ablaze”.

I change the subject to the situation today and the breach of the human right of children to access health-care and share the cases of the two children in El-Dorah paediatric hospital. *“This is normal here”, explains Khalil; “about 900 patients need referred out of Gaza monthly for specialist treatment and less than 10 -15 cases weekly are approved”.* I think back to the man last year, Sabah’s brother-in-law, who died as there was no renal dialysis for him in Gaza; he drowned in his own fluids and toxins.

Speaking of toxins, I move onto the problem with sewage. Pollution was a problem here before the war, the sewage services were breaking down, they need electricity to work, and the constant electricity cuts, made this impossible. That apart, sewage needs to be chemically treated and there are no materials for this. *“About 40-50 million cubic tonnes of raw untreated sewage have been pumped into the sea here since the war”, says Khalil. “A recent study tested the sea water and found 7 hot spots with dangerously high levels of sewage and people now using the beach have been warned to avoid these key 7 areas, but they are still exposed. The problem with the sewage works here is that, like everything else it is run-down, and in need of repair and maintenance. There is a shortage of sewage pipes, equipment, spare parts, chemicals to treat sewage and then the daily power failures make things very difficult”.*

“The electricity failures here also have a huge impact on daily life and they are very disruptive. There is currently electricity for 12 hrs daily, so much better than it was due to a new linkage to Egypt. This week for example, there has been no electricity between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m and then it comes on between midnight and 8 a.m. Then the following week, it will change again. It makes it impossible to plan. That’s one of the problems here, there is no freedom and you always aware of the pressure, the control being exerted on how you choose to live. For example, you might be watching a football match on TV and enjoying it and next think the electricity goes off for 8 hrs and you miss the rest of the match. It is incredibly frustrating. The electricity cuts have a huge impact on hospital services. Last week, I was in Shifa hospital for a meeting and the electricity failed 7 times in 40 minutes. This is impossible for physicians to work with – monitors, equipment in theatres, ventilator support. All hospital equipment need electricity and the generators cannot cope. And some areas are completely without electricity or at most 2 hrs per day”.

“Another problem here is that the majority of people live in high buildings of 7 floors or more. All of the water into the apartments is pumped by motors and so, when the electricity is off, there is no water supply. The power and water failures are especially problematic for old people living alone. It is very stressful. The whole goal is to disrupt daily life here as much as possible. It can be very frustrating”. I can identify with the frustration bit as patience is not one of my virtues. I am not here two weeks even and the constant power failures are incredibly frustrating, also the unreliability of the internet, the weak signal when you can get it and the snail slowness of email. Also, the current seems weak, it takes forever to recharge my mobile phone, camera and laptop. Even drying your hair is difficult here, the first hairdryer disintegrated in my hand, just fell apart onto the floor and the second exploded, much safer to towel dry! Everything is broken in Gaza. Still, I should be thankful, no cockroaches this week.

I ask Khalil, what is his view, is the greatest breach of human rights here in Gaza. *“Undoubtedly, it is the lack of freedom and the feeling of imprisonment. For*

example, I would like to take my mother to Egypt for a holiday, but it is impossible to cross and requests for permits are refused. I haven't seen any of my two brothers or sisters in 2 years and they are unable to visit their mother here in Gaza. Parents and children should be free to visit each other. People living in Gaza are unable to go to parents' funerals in the West Bank. Students here lost a year of their education and many decided to leave university. Even just to have the freedom to go and watch a football match!" I hadn't realised Gaza had a football team. "We don't, but Palestine has and half of the players are from Gaza. We lost 0-4 there to Iraq. We can't go and watch them and players from Gaza only get to be with their team mates for 2 days before any match, so team training is impossible. It's ridiculous!" I think of the human right to play and leisure and the freedom of people in all other countries to follow their chosen sports teams. I ask if his children follow football also. "My youngest son, is a Barcelona fan. I would love to be able to take him to watch a match. I would love to do a lot of things, but living a normal life is just not possible. I ask about his other children. My older son is 16 yrs old, we call him "the rapper". He is very good and he has his own page on Myspace – Aryn Shaheen". I make a note to send him an email and friend request from the Tuesday's Child album Myspace. Football and rapping, regular kids, but trapped in a miserable controlled existence and missing out on their youth.

I ask, in terms of Operation Cast Lead, apart from the obvious lack of regard for life and so many deaths, what, for him was the worst breach of international humanitarian law. *"There were so many breaches of international humanitarian law. For me, personally, the recommendation by Israel in advance of the attack, to people to evacuate their homes, but where could we go, the border with Egypt and Israel remained closed, we had nowhere to go to. In 25 miles of land, where were we possibly to go to. There was no place safe. When people did evacuate their homes, they were shelled and fired on, many were killed doing just what they were told to do. Israel dropped leaflets in advance of the 27th December 2009 saying to the effect – we are coming to destroy Hamas, evacuate your homes. For me that was the worst. It is very clear for the world to see that this was not a war against Hamas, this was a gross assault on Palestinian civilians, a collective punishment of the people of Gaza. UNRWA schools were immediately converted into shelters, considered safe havens, they were marked with blue flags and all locations were given and to Israel and they bombed the UNRWA schools".*

"And still given all we have suffered the blockade and the persecution continues. The blockade is more robust than ever and access for humanitarian aid is increasingly limited. In 2005, 450 trucks came to the area daily, mostly with food and now it is less than 70 per day, sometimes as low as 20 trucks". I raise the matter of the tunnels I visited today and ask his opinion on these. "Like you, I am fundamentally against the tunnels, they are a breach of fair trade, yet they are essential to life and survival here. However, as with any black market, there is a lot of volume, but the quality is very poor. Take for example, other things apart from food, like fuel – 1L of fuel here costs 40 shekels (12 USD) and yet the quality is terrible and the cars are affected". Also, people's health from pollution and by-products, I suggest. Last year, there was no fuel at all, people tried to run their cars on cooking oil and many seized up.

"Even, the rubble, it is every where, we need equipment in to clear it. Buildings are collapsing and killing people. We need materials to rebuild homes, people can't exist in shacks and tarpaulin tents forever". I ask about compensation for all victims and if that will be possible. "Our organisation is currently demanding compensation. We are following up on every war crime committed". I ask if he is pleased with the Amnesty International Report and the awareness it is raising. "Yes, it is a good thing, much of their information was provided from our own work here. Anything that can raise awareness will help. We are publishing a final report on the website soon, featuring 100 families who lost loved ones in the war". I wish Khalil good luck with that and I look forward to reading it.

I ask finally, what the solution is for Gaza. *“An end to the blockade and a one state solution which provides equality and justice for all”* he says. *“The main problem we face is the political divide here now, it is deep and without unity we have no hope”*. I hope that his vision will become a reality.

I say goodnight to this incredible champion of human rights for his people. He deserves more acknowledgment for his tireless work. Check out his website at www.pchrgaza.org

It is now 11.30 p.m and I could really do with a cold beer. Today has been very busy, two paediatric hospitals, the toy distribution, the Rafah tunnels, more toy shopping, a visit from Hamas and a 2 hr meeting with the Khalil and now my blog to update. Full on. Tomorrow morning I will visit Shifa hospital.

Even the visit from Hamas tonight is not enough to keep me awake. I am shattered. How did people here go without sleep for 28 days? I think of all the injustices of the day, the wealth of evidence for the cruelty of daily living under this imprisonment and the sadness of the indifference of so many to their plight, most of all the media.

I am frustrated with God tonight. Where are you in these people’s lives? I know you require suffering, but come on, these people have had enough. No more. This has to stop and You have the power to stop this in an instant. I think of the little 7 yr old boy Mohammed, struggling to breathe from a disease that has already taken the lives of his 3 older siblings and yet referral for life-saving treatment continues to be refused. How terrified this little child must be feeling tonight. I ask my guardian angel to visit his guardian angel and give him my love and my promise that I will continue to try and help his case be heard. Also, of the parents of the baby girl in ICU needing referral and all the children with life-threatening meningitis. And then the more simple hopes and dreams of watching Barcelona play live in Spain, or anywhere, or going to support your national football team or take your mother on holiday. I open Direction for Our Times looking for an answer. *“I the God of All Creation, can slap down and destroy evil with a glance. I allow a certain amount of evil to co-exist because my children can then discern light from darkness, in the same way as a child is taught to learn to discriminate between cold and hot. Children, if you desire to blame Me for the state of the world, your ancestors in heaven will bow their heads in disappointment. Do not be so ridiculous. I do not will catastrophe upon my children. I do allow a certain amount of upheaval so that attention will be focused away from the ever present diversion of material goods. In line with this goal, I will remove many material comforts. Consider this a liberating experience. Your losses on earth are nothing in comparison to the loss you will experience if you choose darkness”*. That’s me told. I tell Him, that I am looking forward to His glance on Gaza! I am sorry for my anger. *“God my Father, help me to understand”*.

If you are in a position to help any of the families we met during our time in Gaza, please contact us at info@tuesdayschild.co.uk or [donate online](#)

[Continues to Day 10 »](#)

Tuesday's Child Blog

Tuesday's Child Returns to Gaza – Day 10

Wednesday 15th July 2009

The hotel is buzzing this morning as there is a Conference on for women bereaved in the war. I prepare the toys and sweets for our visit to Shifa hospital and bring them down to the foyer. A group of young women stop to talk and ask me where I am from. They explain they are here with their teacher for today's conference. UNRWA are also represented here today.

I chat to the young girls and ask them what they are studying and about their career aspirations. I also take a photo and they are delighted to have a digital picture of their group and I promise to send it on by email. Haab would like to be a doctor, Esraa, a chemical engineer, Maram, a university academic and lecturer, Latiaf, a business woman and Wala, a science teacher. They are a very vibrant and dynamic group.



Haab, Esraa, Maram, Latiaf and Wala

I ask about their experiences of the war. All of their families are safe but in each case, their home is badly damaged. They speak of the sheer terror of the war, the constant and relentless bombing, the lack of food and water and the exhaustion and bewilderment of the people. I ask about their hopes for the future and again, world travel features and freedom, the right to make independent choices and, first and foremost, unity in Palestine and an immediate end to the blockade. A very insightful group of young women. I wish them well in their studies and their future careers.

We arrive at Shifa hospital at 10 a.m. Photographs of Shifa hospital are not permitted here of but I take one anyway. We are welcomed by the Medical Director Dr Mohammed Kuzedt. Shifa is by far the largest hospital in Gaza and received the majority of the acute admissions during the war. In terms of infants and children, the hospital has a neonatal unit and a paediatric surgery department. Dr Kuzedt thanks us for our interest in the hospital and the gifts for children.





Shifa hospital, (main admissions area right hand side)



Dr Kuzedt, medical director of Shifa (right) with hospital manager Dr

I ask Dr Kuzedt to describe Shifa hospital during Operation Cast Lead and the response of the hospital and staff to the crisis. *“In the first 10 minutes of the war, 60 bombs and rockets were dropped by air assault as well as shelling from the sea. In the first 30 minutes, a total of 250 attacks and an estimated 100 tonnes of bombs in the first day alone. The hospital received 500 admissions in the first 30 minutes, dead and alive. We did not have the ambulances to cope and people came to us every way imaginable. The ambulances in service entered the area piled with bodies. Throughout the day and many days to follow, the floor of the emergency room was flooded with blood. Not one cm of floor was uncovered and it was like working in a river of blood. The human suffering was extreme and everyone, staff included, were in shock. I am a medical cardiologist and became a surgeon overnight. The injuries were horrific. One family of 5 who came in on the first day, were burnt black, incinerated. As the war continued, large numbers of dead bodies came in from single families. The Samouni family in particular stand out in my mind – 26 dead bodies in a terrible condition, some shot, some decapitated, some churned up by tanks, some burnt, came in on one afternoon. For me, this was one of the most horrific memories. The onslaught was relentless, we were under attack by F16s, apaches, helicopters, warships and discovery technology relentlessly”.*

Dr Kuzedt continues, *“In terms of management of children, this is the paediatric surgery centre and almost all child trauma cases came here for surgery. Many children were already dead on arrival. My God, the number of children that came to us dead was shocking. Many were badly burned, many dismembered. Also, many were shot at close range, clearly direct assassinations. This was not a war, it was not about Hamas, this was a civilian massacre and most of all, it was a slaughter of innocent children. Many babies were killed when they were being breast-fed. Many. Also mothers were killed who were breast-feeding infants. In terms of injuries, they were all acute trauma and the most difficult to manage were the burns. We have treated burns many times but we have never had to treat white*

phosphorus burns. To use such a chemical is too cruel for words”.

“Our staff were exceptional. The hospital became their home for 27 days and they worked triple time. It was difficult working under such extreme conditions and all the adjacent buildings to us were bombed. We lost hospital workers. One case, was particularly tragic. A young technician wanted to go home for a break and check on his family. His father arranged to pick him up outside the hospital. He left at midnight and as he was waiting for his lift, he was killed when the nearby mosque was bombed within minutes of him leaving the hospital. His father arrived to take his son home and he was dead. This case stands out in my mind. Many people were killed in this bomb. The force of it shook the whole hospital and broke many windows. Even the monitors jumped. People were found 4 floors up from the ground level of the mosque and many impaled to the ceiling, it was horrific. All hospitals in Gaza were bombed, not just Shifa. There was no regard for human life here, well any form of life; even cows, sheep, goats and donkeys were slaughtered – shot or burnt or mowed down by tanks”.



Library picture - Shifa Hospital Dec 2009

“The death toll is much higher than reported figures. We estimate 2000 deaths and 5000 injured, of which 2000 critically injured. Of the deaths, 800 were children and a one third of all deaths in children and adults were female. I must also acknowledge the Minister. He was with us here in Shifa 24/7 with the people”.

I sit and listen to the horror and the pain and suffering that this hospital experienced and as he speaks of the river of blood and the many assassinated children the tears flow unashamedly. No hospital emergency or contingency plan could manage this level of trauma. I try and think of former hospitals I have worked in, even large hospitals like St George’s in London and how they, with all their resources, and not in a state of war, struggled to cope with smaller scale disasters such as the Clapham rail disaster. Shifa must have been hell on earth. I read one report from a medical volunteer in The Guardian, at the time, horrific. I wished at the time that I could’ve been here to help. Dr Kuzedt hands me his mobile phone and on it a picture of his son Mohammed, who died in the war. He was 21 yrs old. I give him my condolences, this physician turned surgeon overnight, who must have worked so hard to save so many lives and lost his own son in the process. I ask how he died, he does not answer but gives thanks to God for his life and that he died defending his country.



Library picture - Shifa Hospital Dec 2009

Dr Kuzedt thanks us for coming and our interest and support and arranges for a person from PR to escort us around the hospital. *“Even your visit is of great support to us. We know that Ireland has great empathy for the people of Gaza and we thank you for your consideration for our children”*. With that we end our meeting and the hospital tour begins.

We are escorted through the large admissions area and emergency room and to the paediatric department. As we walk along the corridor I notice the sign for the burns unit where Dr Khan and his team were hoping to be in February. How their expertise could've helped so many and again I reflect on their disappointment at Rafah. Thankfully, their trip was not in vain as they were able to lend their expertise to the badly injured transferred to the Palestinian hospital in Cairo and hopefully at least some of the many supplies they brought with them made it through to Shifa. I joined Dr Khan's round on the first day. I have worked with many consultants on clinical attachments in my time, and while I was not part of Dr Khan's team, he was exceptional. Quite brilliant and it was a privilege to observe him at work.

We wait outside the paediatric unit here for some 20 minutes as the paediatric surgeons are all praying. Again, the faith of the many of the people here is commendable. God and the hope of peace seems central to their daily lives.

I am welcomed by the Head of Paediatric Surgery, Dr Kuzedtz, who is also fluent in English. He thanks me for the gifts for the children. The department first opened in 1990 and the majority of patients admitted here are between 0-12 yrs. Many routine cases here are congenital abnormalities and hereditary diseases resulting from close inter-marriage.

He speaks of the unit during the war. *“In terms of total admissions to Shifa, 40 – 50 percent were children under 12 yrs old. Specialist surgeons became generalists overnight and everyone helped where they could. Surgery was difficult under the constant bombing and the lack of equipment, facilities and essentials like blood made the situation much more difficult. In the first 30 minutes of the war, we had 56 paediatric admissions to this unit and probably, as many again, if not more, were dead on arrival to the hospital. The first day was the worst in terms of fatalities and injuries. Surgical procedures for children were mainly head injuries, occlusions, burns and sadly many amputations. I, nor any of my colleagues have ever had to deal with trauma on this scale. It was horrific. Many children have long-term complications and there is huge need still for trauma counselling. Other children were transferred to other countries for treatment – Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon mainly.*

All of the children affected by war have been discharged now. Some are still in the Rafah Centre for rehabilitation and if you have time you should visit there”.

I thank him for his time and we start our tour of the beds. Many of the children here are very sick. Many I note have hydrocephalus. I have never witnessed so many babies with congenital malformations in one place. It is quite shocking. More education is needed about the risks of close inter-

marriage. We give out toys and, to those who are able, also sweets. Also, again, nurses and allied staff ask for toys for their children.

The wards in the unit here are very basic, the hospital is clearly under-funded and again there is no evidence that this is a paediatric unit. There is no infection control as we know it at home although hospital staff are mopping wards as we walk around.

We walk some distance to visit the neonatal unit. I am looking forward to seeing it but the consultant here does not permit us to enter. It is a pity as I was keen to see it and assess their needs. Next time hopefully.

From Shifa, we travel to a blind school in the same area. We have received many calls from the school this morning to visit them before we leave Gaza. No time like the present so we stop and visit. We are met by the two directors, of the school, one of who herself is blind. They are urgently in need of Braille paper and they are unable to get this through the blockade. They have asked for paper many times but it is refused and they have asked many organisations to assist them with little joy. I had heard last year that batteries for children's hearing aids for the deaf school were refused access and now Braille paper for blind children. My goodness, again, I am struck by the pettiness of these people who call consider themselves civilised. I wonder what Christ would make of it? I hope, when He comes, a second time, He will come to the deaf and blind children of Gaza first.

The children have already left for the day. I ask if they have many new children since the war and yes they speak of many children who lost their sight during the war. They speak of one boy in particular from Northern Gaza who lost both his eyes and is struggling to adapt to a life of blindness. They ask me to come back and meet the children tomorrow. I explain I cannot but hopefully on our next visit. The offer to leave a CD of their work into my hotel. I promise to look at it and do my best to help with Braille paper. Again, the problem, as always for us, is access for materials.



Directors of the blind school, with sample of Braille paper they in need of

This afternoon, I ask to visit the Zeitoun area of Gaza city. Here on Sunday 4th January, 50 members of the one extended family, the El Samouni family were rounded up. This family, citizens not refugees, survived the greatest loss of life in the war and the Red Cross described it as "a shocking incident". It received a lot of press coverage at the time and yet I was keen to visit it and pay my respects to those who lost their lives here. The Samounis were a very poor family, all farriers, living in 12 makeshift homes in this area. Israeli soldiers knocked on one of the homes, asking for the father of the house, he came out and they shot him dead in front of his family. On the following morning of Monday 5th January, all of the Samounis were rounded up into Wa'el Smaouni's house. Many were shot directly in front of each other and the house was continuously shelled with the dead and injured buried in the rubble. The Red Cross was refused access and ambulances could not get to the area for 4 days. The first help to this home came by foot, by which time 29 people were dead, the rest injured. Some died from shells, some from

direct shooting, other bodies torn up by tanks. As I walk around the area, there is nothing left, here. There is no evidence now of this massacre, only a solitary shoe in the rubble. All of the dead were civilians. Many of the injured are still to be traumatised to speak of the atrocity. Those who have spoken, said apart from the pain and the bleeding and the sheer terror, they were starving as there was no food in the home. Two of the surviving children were treated in the paediatric surgery department in Shifa we visited earlier today. The family are not here at the moment, we will call back again.



Memorial picture to the El Samouni dead



What is left of the El Samouni houses and tent where surviving family live now



Solitary shoe lies in the area where 29 people of the El Samouni family were killed

I am told of another family also, in Zeitoun, the Al Dayah family, who lost 22 members including 12 children and a pregnant woman. Only two brothers survived this attack. In this household, Israeli forces entered and shot some of the family dead. They then ordered the rest of the family to evacuate. They refused saying there was fighting all around and they would be killed and begged mercy most of all for the children and babies. They were assured they would not be hurt and the children would come to no harm. They were marched 500 metres along the road behind soldiers. The soldiers walked to both sides of the road and the order was given to open fire on the family. Again, here many of them bled to death from their wounds as emergency services could not access the area. Again, all of the dead, were civilians, ordinary people, hungry people, trying to make something for their children out of nothing.

It is one horror story after another, and despite, after even all of this, the world permits this blockade to continue. All of humanity should be deeply ashamed for not speaking out louder and saying **END THE BLOCKADE**.

I feel sick, nauseated to the pit of my stomach by what happened here. I return to the hotel, to take a shower and there is no water. The heat is stifling and clinging. I cannot get the horror of Zeitoun out of my head, now thumping. I am outraged at all I have heard to day, both in Shifa, at the blind school and in Zeitoun. I look out at the sun setting and wonder why such a small place has had to endure so much bloodshed and sheer cruelty and wish they could all be transported to a happier land.



Sunset in Gaza

Sabah, phones and asks me how the day went. I have no words, only tears. I drive over to see her and we talk. I ask more about the El Samouni family and she says she will send me pictures. Ayia, Sabah's daughter takes me round the

corner to a hair salon. I laugh as I have a thing about having clean hair and, with no hot water, or even no water, on many occasion, it is very welcome. And hot water, heaven and a head massage, nirvana. We sit in the salon and I speak to the women working here of the war. The lady drying my hair tells me of the horror. Also, of her little boy, who is still in shock and does not speak, he has a constant stutter and is now mostly silent. That was the greatest shock for me the weeks of the war and after, the shock of many children, all so silent. She asks if I can help her little boy, I explain I can't, but often with these things and with as much normality as possible, he should come round and start to speak with his brothers and sisters again, but not to force him to speak. I have toys and sweets with me, in my bag, always a supply on hand. As she dries my hair, the electricity fails 6 times. I tell her it doesn't matter, I am just happy that it is clean. I think of the large salons at home, and what they and their clients would make of this. On the sixth failure however, she insists in wheeling her generator out onto the street. I don't know, or want to know, what she has plugged it into, but again we have light and she dries off my hair. And then her sister arrives, with her little boy, Mamoud, who does not speak. I sit him on my knee and give him a toy and he laughs and giggles. We sing a song and he joins in for a few words, but after still, nothing. At least there are smiles. I pray that he will find his voice again in time.



3 yr old Mamoud who has not spoken since the war

I return to Sabah's house. The days are going so quickly now and we still have so much to do. It is hard to believe I have been here 10 days already. Tomorrow afternoon, she will take me to meet new families, not yet part of our feeding programme, who are in need of help and support. Tomorrow morning I am back with UNRWA.

The internet is working tonight when I get back to my hotel! Good to have it back. In my email, many good wishes from home and then some library pictures from the El Samouni massacre of Zeitoun. I open, in disbelief and fill

with sadness. Also, a link to the latest report from the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights here entitled War Crimes against Children (www.pchrgaza.org) that includes a report on the Al Dayah family, among many other shattered families, whose losses must be just too painful to bear. Shocking reading and viewing and made all the worse by being in this place earlier this afternoon.



Library picture - One of the Samouni family found dead in the rubble Jan 2009, with permission



Library picture - Survivor of the Samouni family with a few salvaged some belongings (Jan 2009)

I open direction for our times tonight at heaven speaks to those who are experiencing tragedy and I read *“My beloved child, I grasp the depth of your pain. I will walk you through each moment of anguish, surrounding you with heaven’s graces. No. You will not be left alone to walk through this tragedy”* and later again the following words from *Our Lady, or Miriam as she is known by the Muslim faith,* *” My poor little child how you suffer. There are times when suffering is so great that a little one cannot even feel the comfort that is lavished upon them. It is this way for you now. In your grief you stagger but you are supported. Your pain will not be without value....I am with you little dove. Your pain will not be without value and every tear that you cry will be a tear that is noticed by heaven. Peace now as we walk you through this time of grief”*. As I read these words, it is clear that the poor little child to which they refer, is Gaza itself, for in its smallness, just 25 miles long, it is a child among much the bigger countries and continents who should know better.

If you are in a position to help any of the families we met during our time in Gaza, please contact us at info@tuesdayschild.co.uk or [donate online](#)

[Continues to Day 11 »](#)

Tuesday's Child Blog

Tuesday's Child Returns to Gaza – Day 11

Thursday 16th July 2009

This morning I am back with UNRWA again to visit one of their health centres, call into the summer games and to meet with John Ging. It is very generous of UNRWA to give me so much of their time. The car arrives at 8.45 a.m and I am visiting the projects today with Johanne and Salma. As we drive, I ask Johanne, in the back seat beside me, about her work and she explains that she has worked in the UNRWA Gaza field office for 5 yrs. Unlike many of her colleagues she was not evacuated during Operation Cast Lead but remained in Gaza. *“The most terrifying thing was the lack of safety. No one was safe in Gaza, not even UN staff. The bombardment was constant and the noise, the pounding and bombing was endless. The sound was deafening, we had these constant ear splitting sonic booms of the F16s, my hearing still hasn't recovered. I wonder about the long-term damage to infant's and children's hearing here, well everyone's”*. I can identify with the hearing problems given that I have full right-sided post-traumatic hearing loss just from the noise of an road traffic accident impact in Cork, 7 yrs ago, when passenger in a car there. Having an F16 drop a bomb on your house must be in a completely different league. It would be interesting to know how many people here have auditory damage from the war. Salma, sitting upfront, is from Gaza, Jabalyia. I tell her, for me, Jabalyia is the most vibrant and colourful part of Gaza. Also, there are so many children in Jablayia and donkeys! Salam is expecting her second child. She was also here during the war, her home was damaged but thankfully all of her family are safe.

I ask about UNRWA and how they felt about UNRWA buildings being targeted. *“Again, the most striking thing, was the lack of safety, for all of us. There was no place safe and there was no regard for the UN. Some of our aid workers was tragically killed and other employees were injured. It was a very dangerous time. We recommended our schools to the population as safe havens to come to and these came under attack even, it was shocking”*,

Johanne explains. I recall that afternoon of the 6th January vividly, the feast of the Epiphany, a cold crisp dark afternoon in Belfast, when a UNRWA school was hit in Gaza and many children among the dead and injured. I heard it on the evening news at 5.30 p.m when driving across the city to our candlelit vigil to pray for an end to the war. I was due to give a live TV interview to BBC N.Ireland shortly afterwards and was shocked from the radio bulletin and crying from the news. I remember the interviewer telling me, I'd better pull myself together as I was live in 10 minutes. I composed myself, gave the interview and it was she who was then in tears at the end of the TV broadcast. It also struck me that the need for prayer that night was also more poignant now. Many came out that cold night in Belfast to walk with is in prayer, candlelight and song to the Infant Child, for an end to the war in Gaza. A local man also died also that night on our walk, a very good man, a Belfast solicitor and veteran for peace in N.Ireland. The following day, my little friend Dima, was badly injured. On the 6th she would've been unhurt and playing with her brothers and sisters under the watchful care of her parents. She died on 3rd March, the 313th and last child to die from Operation



Cast Lead. My prayer, then, that no more children would be murdered in Gaza and that Dima's death would be the end of the slaughter of innocents. I also think of the El Samouni family, while the UNRWA school was being bombed, many of them were already dead, others lying bleeding to death, with the Red Cross unable to access them. I shiver at the thought of it.

We talk of our common interest in humanitarian relief work and Johanne tells me how much she enjoys working for UNRWA. *"I was here before John Ging"*, she explains, *"his arrival made a huge difference. He is a strategist with great vision and services here have improved considerably under his management. He has great leadership and we all find him great to work for"*.

"The job is wonderful, I love what I do, however, you never really get away from Gaza" Johanne says. *"I was away for a week-end in Europe and people at the next table to us were eating strawberries. They were saying how hard it is to get nice strawberries at this time of year. And all I could think of was the Gazan strawberries and the blockade, you know, hello end the siege guys and you can have lots more strawberries! And then, when I am really really outraged, I curse in Bosnian. I did a lot of that here in January!"* I warm to Johanne, she has a strong sense of justice, is very passionate about her work here and is clearly a woman of tenacity.

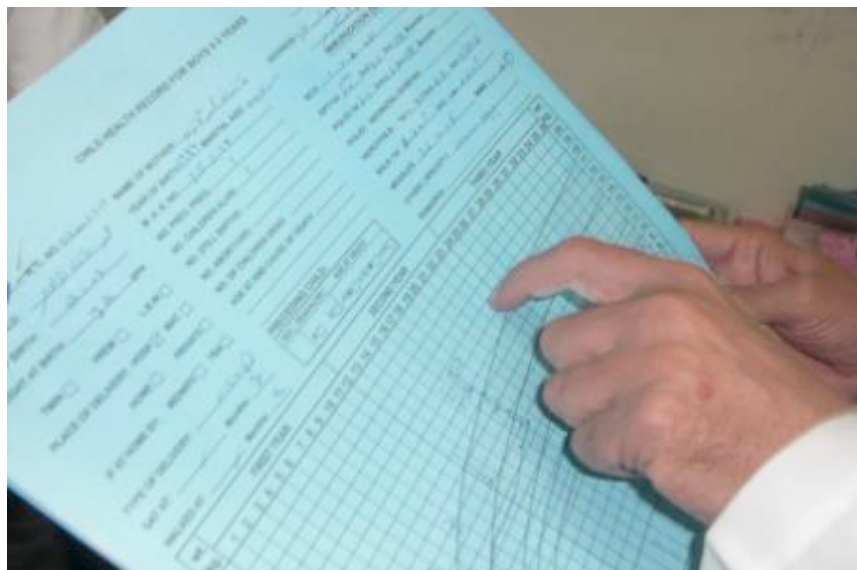
We arrive at our first stop, Rimal Health Centre, which provides primary healthcare to some 150,000 refugees. We are welcomed by the medical director Dr Mordi, a very informed and clearly hard working man, who co-ordinates this busy centre. Some estimated 2000 people per day attend the centre for treatment. The clinic employs 10 general physicians, as well as specialists. Dr Mordi gives us a whistle stop tour and we meet some of the staff and patients. 10 GPs for 150,000 people, that is quite a remit. I think back to a busy GP practice I worked in at home, with 5 GPs for 8000 patients. Quite a difference here and I wonder how long the appointment time must be?!



Dr Mordi, in the mother and baby clinic

The main problems currently in children are acute infections such as gastroenteritis and chest infections. The main chronic problem in children is anaemia and malnutrition. Food supplements are given but these only work when there is enough food to supplement. I am introduced to a retired obstetrician, now returned by demand. His case load averages at 35-40 women per day. He describes an incidence of anaemia in pregnancy of 70 percent, even with iron supplementation. The main cause is iron deficiency, also to a much lesser degree vitamin B12 deficiency and thalassaemia. Anaemia is a huge risk to pregnancy and I am surprised that even with supplementation, the incidence is still so high. Rimal Health Centre works

hard to follow children and here all the children have growth charts, pink for girls and blue for boys. I smile as I think back to a similar system I introduced in St George's Hospital in London for premature babies and how my mentor, Ian, teased me over my baby blue and baby pink system and for being such a "girlie". They still use the blue and pink though! In this case I note the little boy's growth is going well.



Percentile growth charts in Rimal Health Centre



Cardiology clinic

One of the rooms we go into is the cardiology clinic where a patient is just about to have an ECHO examination. I ask the cardiologist about incident of cardiac morbidities during and since the war. He advises that heart complaints have increased by 25 percent post war and that cardiac deaths increased considerably during and immediately post war.

Our tour also takes us to the dental department and then to the physiotherapy department before having to leave. The physio department here must have dealt with a lot of war injuries!



Physiotherapy clinic

I am very impressed with the UNRWA health clinic. It really is a one stop shop for primary health care and the visit here is very uplifting after seeing so many cases in their own homes in lack of basic health care needs. I would like to know more about outreach services into the community but we are out of time and must move on to our next scheduled visit.

Our next stop is UNRWA's Summer Games. The initiative was first launched in June 2007 after a particularly violent episode in the strip. The summer games provide an all important outlet for children and young people of Gaza who have seen so much death and destruction and have to live with daily poverty and despair. The summer games are co-ordinated at 15 beach locations throughout Gaza. Beach activities include ball games, bouncy castles, swimming lessons, arts and crafts. Other activities include athletics, drama, dancing and kite-flying.

We arrive at 10.15 and the heat is blistering. Today there is a festival for all the children involved in summer games and there is great excitement. It is wonderful to see so many children singing and enjoying themselves. The co-ordinator here points out to one little girl in the crowd her lost her leg in an F16 bomb; she seems to be enjoying herself with her friends. Parents welcome the summer games as it gives children and young people here a chance to enjoy themselves and express themselves after all they have been through. They also restore confidence and ofcourse recreation is an essential pre-requisite to more effective learning.

One of the events of this morning's festival, is some local dancing and we are invited up to participate. Again, a bit like Irish dancing, albeit a little slower and on the beach.



Johanne, Salma and Bahra, from UNRWA at the summer games festival



Children do supervised tumbles down a bouncy slide



Children sing a long and clap to the music at the summer games festival



Little boy with his mother comes along to the summer games festival



Traditional dancing on the beach



Lots of support for the dancers from the audience

The Summer Games, for me, is one of UNRWA's greatest achievements. Not all however in Gaza, see it like this. The programme has come under considerable opposition, wrongly accused of corrupting the morals of the

Palestinian people and “*acting to defile a conservative clean society*”, as stated in a recent publication. How can a society move forward in hope for the future hold such a view? Such a perception is narrow and grossly misplaced for recreation, play and leisure is an internationally recognised human right of every child. What is also clear is that every child I have met here this morning is thoroughly enjoying themselves, and surely, the very least they are entitled to, given what they have just come through, indeed what they have lived with all of their young lives. Participation in Summer Games should be a decision for each individual child to make, not those who would seek to thwart letting children be children and do what children do best – have fun. Also, why is it western influences are always lambasted; play and leisure feature in daily life of children in the East.

Time to say good-bye to the Summer Games festival and on to UNRWA headquarters to meet with the UNRWA Director John Ging.

John welcomes me to UNRWA and thanks me for making it back to Gaza for my second visit this year. He says he appreciates it is not the easiest of trips. I don't mind the trip over it is the bit on the way out I don't care for, or as in the February attempt, not getting in at all! I thank him and tell him I am glad to be back again. It is good to meet John, I hold him in high regard, as do my colleagues in Tuesday's Child, for he is a true champion of the human rights of people living in the Middle East. I met John once before 4 months ago, albeit briefly, after he gave an inspiring address in the Law Faculty at Queen's University, Belfast, arranged by Trocaire.



With UNRWA Director, John Ging

I thank him for the itinerary kindly arranged and congratulate him on the work of UNRWA. He graciously and generously attributes UNRWA's success to his team, such is the humble nature of the man. I suggest that he should run for President of Gaza, as so many people I have met on this trip speak so highly of him. “*Not all the people*”, he assures me, “*I can refer you to 2 Hamas editorials recently that suggest otherwise*”. He cites the price tag of his own personal security here in the strip; I would settle for 10 percent of it for Tuesday's Child's projects here. I could build a water park with that percentage. I would love to build a water park in Gaza! My dreams apart, this innovative UNRWA Director treads a risky path and I am aware he has already survived one assassination attempt in 2007.



John Ging, UNRWA Director with one of his key staff, Johanne Van Dyke

John commends me on Tuesday's Child's commitment to Gaza, our efforts at home and the work we do here. I thank him for the compliment, also generous, for we are only a small NGO, child-like in comparison to UNRWA, albeit with a big heart. *"Your being here brings humanity and hope, that is important, just being here and meeting and listening to the people is greatly appreciated. It is a witness to the truth of their situation and that the outside world care"*. I thank him again, saying that the first visit was all it took and that *"one only has to meet these people once to carry them in your heart"*.

"More people should come to Gaza and see the situation here. There is nothing to fear here now", he says. I agree there is no fear yet it is difficult to convince others of that, something of which he is all too clearly also aware. I say that, for me, *"the only fear is the inability of the Gaza people to recover from the human suffering and sheer trauma of the recent war and the humanitarian crisis imposed by the ongoing blockade"*. They were suffering enough as it was before this latest onslaught. I also note the change in the human environment since my first visit 11 months ago, the people are clearly more divided and the undercurrent of extremism is more marked, also that many others are sickened and no longer care for politics. There is also less hope. *"More extremism is unfortunately inevitable after Operation Cast Lead, however the good news is that the majority of the people are still resisting it"*, he says.

I congratulate him on the coup of former President Jimmy Carter's recent visit and he smiles, offering that Jimmy Carter is a humanitarian and an expert in the business of human development. Clearly, a meeting of like minds, Ging and Carter. *"The US Ministers have got it, they are happy to come and see the truth of the situation here, they have bought the ticket. It is harder however getting European countries to take an active interest. Some have made statements but they are slow to cut to the chase and follow through with actions"*, he says.

I share my thoughts on the suffering and the cruelty I have witnessed these last 10 days in Gaza and most of all the persecution of the children. I refer to some of the children I met earlier this week in the hospitals and all that they are going through. Also, the little boy with congenital myasthenia gravis and the little baby girl with intractable epilepsy, both needing urgent transfer for treatment, refused by Israeli authorities. Big brave men, robbing sick children of their right to access to life-saving treatment. For me, this is perhaps the most despicable of breaches, here. What harm can a four month old baby girl in intensive care possibly do to the state of Israel? I also share my observations on the state of the hospitals, the clear lack of funding, their dilapidated condition and how difficult it must be to practice in these

conditions.

Yet the children here are full of hope. The majority of children I have met, be it in their own homes, in the summer learning programme or just on the streets, have hope. While many have no school buildings to return to in September, when it comes to their futures, their career aspirations are high. They speak of careers as doctors, journalists, engineers, social workers, lawyers and human rights lawyers even, in part, reflective of the recent trauma here. John tells me of one little boy, to whom he asked the same question, who told him he wanted to be a fighter pilot when he grew up! I also share my findings of asking children here to give me three things they are brilliant at. All, of us, whichever children we come in to contact with, be they are own children, nieces and nephews, children of friends or children we mentor or teach, should ask this same question. And of course, it should not all be about academics but a more rounded approach to abilities. Some children offer here that they are brilliant at Summer Games.

I ask him if things would perhaps be better for Gaza, if an Irish American president was in the White House. "*We couldn't hope for better than Obama*", John says, "*if anyone can bring about a solution to the political and humanitarian crises here, Obama and his administration can. He has also nailed the current crux of the conflict – the expansion of the settlements in the West Bank*". While, he may have identified this, I do not concur. My own private view is that while Obama is certainly a considerable improvement on the former president and war monger, George Bush, I have little confidence in his ability to bring peace to the Middle East or indeed to bring an end to the death of innocents, particularly, given his stance on abortion. Indeed, pushing through his policies on this will lead to a slaughter infinitely greater than that witnessed in Gaza. Tuesday's Child also stands for the rights of the unborn child. I could never vote or promote any politician who does not uphold this most basic and fundamental right to life and give voice to those who are truly voiceless in this world. However, I am here to discuss the humanitarian plight of the people of Gaza and how it may be resolved not Tuesday's Child's position on abortion and so I keep these thoughts to myself.

"*The borders need to open – it is the only solution*", continues John Ging. "*Once people can resume more normal lives, have freedom to travel, go to work every day, they will forget about all of the intensity of division here. Unless the borders open, however, Gaza will continue in a downward spiral*". I ask about the tunnels and he says they do nothing to enhance the likelihood of an end to the siege and that a select few are "*making millions*" from the tunnels in black market trade. Also, that the tunnels are the excuse being given for not permitting much needed building materials into the strip, which of course is ridiculous. "*The blockade traps decent civilised people here, it is a collective punishment of 1.5 million people. The collective sanction of so many civilians and the appalling human suffering as a result is a breach of International Humanitarian Law*".

I ask him, an end to the siege apart, what, in his view, it will take to end the suffering in Gaza. "*Truth, justice and accountability*", he answers. "*We cannot have a civilised society with truth and justice and the mechanisms to hold people account for their actions. The rule of the law is needed. It is either the rule of the law or the rule of the gun. The rule of the Law must prevail. People like me make laws. The law defines us as either civilised or non-civilised human beings. Also, policies are needed based on truth and people need to be restored to a dignified existence in which they can feel safe*".

It is clear John Ging is a great advocate of the law and upholds good practice. We could do with him at home, for in my book, the Irish legal system, is corrupt, full of too many sewer rats feeding of the injustice and human misery

of others, so called professional people who have lost all sight of the pillars of truth and justice. Yes, the Law society in Ireland, could do with more practitioners like John Ging.

We discuss the issue of Shilat. "*While unfortunate*", he states, "*he is just one prisoner. There are 11,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons in the West Bank. Look at the situation in Ramallah, children are being arrested and imprisoned for throwing stones at soldiers. They should be throwing flowers back at them, they are children*" he says, clearly incensed by the injustice of it. "*You should make time and visit Ramallah and see what is happening there before you return home*".

We discuss the dangers of imprisoning children and teenagers and I share my own experience of Northern Ireland where teenagers were lifted on the streets and arrested without charge. Internment turned too many into future terrorists. In a flash, I think back to my own childhood and life in Belfast, where many older children were lifted for the same thing, beaten and some interned. And later, children would die from the so-called plastic bullets. There but for the grace of God go I.

It was not just the occupying and local forces who hounded catholic children in Northern Ireland, but our own people, who crossed the line, even in our schools. That was the greatest tragedy, that elders in our own community facilitated the transition, indeed actively encouraged, young people to move from the rule of the law to the rule of the gun. Irish classes in grammar schools for the catholic elite became hotbeds of paramilitary enrolment. As for incursions and massacres, Bloody Sunday was the greatest source of recruitment for young men and women into the IRA. The tragedy here in Gaza, is that undoubtedly, Operation Cast Lead will have served similar purposes for Hamas. And given, the current climate in Gaza, I cannot envisage Hamas encouraging its young people to opt for the rule of law. Perhaps I am mistaken, maybe I should give them more credit than that, but I doubt they have the vision that is needed to keep their young people safe.

For a moment I am lost in thought and realising it, quickly return. I suggest the possibility of a specialist think tank to find a solution to the humanitarian crisis and the blockade - the cream of human rights commissioners and experts in human development around one table. He smiles, telling me it is already in hand and scheduled for the end of August. I get the feeling that John Ging is always at least one step ahead of every suggested possibility for bringing a solution. "*Mary Robinson will be joining us*" he says. I tell him I have great respect for her, that I met her briefly in Belfast last October and asked her why the UN Declaration of Human Rights was continuing to fail the people of Gaza. "*That is a reasonable question , one we should all be asking and seeking an answer to*", he offers.

I give John a copy of our Tuesday's Child double music album and also a copy of the live recording of our two music gigs for Gaza in Dublin's Vicar St earlier this year...plenty of good Irish music, just in case he is feeling homesick! Or if he is ever feeling a tad jaded, The Waterboys' *Bring Them All In* or *The Whole of The Moon* will soon see him right! However, for Gaza, we need a "Let Them All Out" and I make a note to write to Mike Scott and ask if he will consider penning a reverse version! Time to end the meeting, my hour is up and, while not being one for photos, kindly obliges me with a few pictures. I am tempted to ask, if he knows where I could find a bottle of cold Carlsberg!

John Ging is a man of integrity, he exudes truth and justice. He is honest and he calls a spade a spade. Intellectually, he is brilliant, a strategist with vision, the work ethic to support it and the humour and wit, to keep him sane. He is clearly committed to his work for the people of Gaza and has taken them, well the majority of them, to his heart. Most of all, he has the courage to speak out.

If I could mark one defining characteristic, however, it is his sheer tenacity, for it is clear that he has the determination, persistence and optimism, in the face of adversity and opposition, to get the job done and achieve his goal. Yes, I have every confidence in John Ging and his ability to make it happen. If anyone can facilitate bringing truth, justice and freedom to the people of Gaza, he can.

I thank him for his time, wish him continued success and good luck in his efforts and leave him to the job at hand. God speed!



UNRWA Director John Ging at his desk

I join his team for lunch and top up on some UNRWA bottled water before being driven back to my hotel.

Johanne talks about the forthcoming kite flying day at the end of the month when UNRWA are hoping the Gazan children will enter the Guinness book of records for their kite flying competition. Good stuff. A sight to behold I am sure and I am sorry I will miss it. I recall a statistic from 2008, when a group of young boys were assassinated by occupying forces while flying their kites on the beach.

As I am driven back through the streets of Gaza city in the UN geep, I follow the scenes of poverty and hardship, never-ending piles of rubble and twisted metal, children playing wherever they can, and one life story flashing into the next, every doorway a window on injustice. I think back to my own childhood and living with occupying forces and corrupt local law enforcement forces in Northern Ireland and the daily intimidation that came with the territory. We were very lucky, we had a comfortable standard of living for many years and even when times were lean still never wanted for anything, yet, as with all children in those times, we had to learn to live with the troubles. They were woven into our daily life. Ours was a strongly nationalist, but never republican family, and that regardless, the rule of Obedience was first and foremost in our home, you did what you were told and you only had to be told once. The occupation of Gaza, is on a different level of terror, there is no escaping it. These are truly a terrorised people and they still have no guarantee of safety or that a further massacre will not follow.



Unsafe building, Gaza city

Life in Northern Ireland has thankfully moved on, the rule of the gun has been replaced with the rule of law, but the undercurrent of extremism is still there. For me, it was never more apparent than when organising our prayer vigil for an end to the conflict in Gaza earlier this year. For what many don't appreciate around the world, is that Operation Cast Lead polarised both communities in Northern Ireland and people, once again, pinned their colours to the post. Nonetheless, there is a political forum now, and the majority are agreed that the only way forward is through nonviolent means. My hope is that if it possible in Northern Ireland, it is also possible here in Gaza.

Gaza has that affect on you, it takes you back to the times of your childhood, either to happy times that every child is entitled to or to times when your safety was threatened by war. We, as children of the troubles, had our skirmishes and issues, but overall we still had happy childhoods. We had to live with daily injustices but we were still free, we could go on holiday to other parts of Ireland, to Donegal or Dublin or Galway, the regular holiday and long week-end spots in our house. The children here have nowhere to go. This polluted stretch of coastline is their only escape in this tiny stretch of occupied and increasingly embargoed strip of land where many are now forced to live in makeshift homes in the rubble.

I think of the similarities and differences between myself and John Ging, both Irish, one a child of the North and the other a child of the free South, exposed to hugely different experiences, yet both sharing a profound sense of humanity. What is clear, is that wherever we are born and whichever path any of us take in life, ultimately there is only one path we should choose, the path of truth and justice. What is also clear is that we were each blessed. No child should be exposed to the horrors of Gaza and the collective punishment here. Only time will tell how the trauma of their experience of hunger, poverty, death and despair, will affect their psyche and shape their future for this blockade and the ongoing occupation has surely robbed them of their childhood. May the UNRWA summer games and kite flying competitions long continue!

I return to the hotel and catch up with my emails and fundraising efforts at home. Some time also to write my blog and rehydrate with the supply of safe drinking water from UNRWA.

Sabah picks me up at 5 p.m. and we drive south through Deil El Balah to meet a group of families living in a area close to the border. Again, driving through Deil El Balah, more evidence of destruction on either side. We pass the police station that was flattened in the early days of the war and where policemen lay dismembered in the courtyard.



Shattered homes in Deil El Balah



Flattened site of former police station in Deil El Balah

We stop to pick up two school teachers from one of the schools in this area we brought supplies into last year. It is great to see them again, safe and well. I recognise the area as we approach, we had a sweet street party here! We drive out past Deil El Balah to a more rural area to meet some families. These are not in our feeding programme but we are here to assess their needs and give them cash assistance.

Our first call this evening is with the Siad family of 9 people. The children here, like many I have met, show skin pigmentation changes. I ask Mr Siad about the war and where he stayed. *"We are used to occupation and living so close to the border, soldiers coming into our home. We decided to stay in our house as this is where we feel most safe. The house as not occupied thankfully but we had no food or water for many days. Eventually, I went out and managed a little food and water from our neighbours. The bombing was endless, we were convinced that many of our neighbours must surely be killed"*. I ask the children what they like doing, football is a big favourite and we give them a new ball. I recognise the UNRWA summer games t-shirt on one of the boys and asks if he enjoys it. *"The summer games are the best thing we have in Gaza"*, he says. I ask the children who are here what they want to do when the grown up. In this home, we have a doctor, an engineer and a footballer.



We give Mrs Siad, money towards food for her family

Our next family, also Siad's are not at home, except for the father of the house, he has six children, all girls and tells us he is enjoying the peace and quiet of the evening.



Siad Said, home alone

He is very grateful for the money and we drive on to our next stop, some distance. We are very close to the border here and I am told not to take any photos. I just manage one quick shot of the border through the trees. Our driver Ahmed doesn't feel safe in this area and would prefer to get out of here as quickly as possible. He feels the large service taxi driving down this dirt track is much too obvious. There are children all along as we drive along and we stop to give them bags of sweets. Our visit here is to the family in Gaza living closest to the Israel border, within 300 meters. It certainly wouldn't be a spot I would choose to live!



View of the border through the trees

The family here are the Mobark family, the husband and some of the older boys are not at home, but Mrs Mobark is here with the younger children and her brother whom she also looks after. She invites me into the house and shows me around, it is very poor and there is no light inside. The kitchen shows no sign of food apart from some yams and tomatoes. There is great excitement here and as we give out toys and sweets to the children and sweets to Mrs Mobark's brother. She shows me the damage to the roof of her home sustained in the 23 day war and the many bullet holes in the wall of the house. I ask the children if they like school, they don't and often they don't bother going at all as it is too far to walk each day especially when they are hungry and have little to eat. I ask how far the school is and am told about 8 miles. I ask if none of the local neighbours here have transport, even a donkey and cart to take the children in and out to school and I am told no. We give Mrs Mobark money for food and make arrangements to buy a donkey and cart for the family on the understanding that someone will take the children into school. We give the older children a premier football and they are much more excited about this than the prospect of school transport.



Mrs Mobark and 5 of her 7 children



Mrs Mobark's brother Mohammed

On now to the Hatam Siad family, whose father is disabled and little girl is also disabled. Theirs is a much nicer home with a bathroom, the first I have seen in any of these houses and I notice a plaque on the wall, saying, built by The Welfare Foundation. I met some officers of the Welfare Foundation in London at a Palestinian platform there in May and they were clearly very committed to the work they do here. It is nice to see some of it in action. The baby girl here has a congenital malformation of the head which looks like hydrocephalus but I am not sure. We leave some money for cash assistance. Outside this house, many children from neighbouring houses gather and we distribute toys and sweets. The bubbles are a big hit here.



Children queue up for toys and sweets

We drive on to visit the Abu Jalal home in the same rural area. Many policemen live in this area and Sabah explains that generally this area is overlooked when it comes to aid. Only one of the family is at home, a 17 yr old girl and she is a little intimidated by the large group arriving. Sabah and I go in and talk with her. She and her sister go to university. She shows us round the family home, there is no furniture, not even one chair and in the kitchen there is nothing to eat. I ask her what she has eaten today and she says nothing. I ask her what she is doing and she points to a mattress on the floor, some loose leafs of paper and a biro. "*I am studying*", she says.

There are no furnishings in the home, just bare stone walls and I notice no clothes. Nothing, the house is a shell. I ask Sabah about the clothes and she gently enquires. She tells us she only owns the dress that she is wearing, the same with her sister, who also goes to college and they alternate the two outfits between them. Of all of the houses here, this is the most in need. How can she possibly study, if she hasn't eaten today? I don't take a photo here as, with everyone we ask first and her preference is no. I gave her money for the family for food and also money for herself and her sister for some clothes and supplies for college. She is overwhelmed and dissolves into tears. "*Thank you, thank you, thank you*", the young girl says, squeezing my hand, and she also gives thanks also to God. I tell her she is most welcome and we will continue to help her. I walk away in tears. This situation is too much to handle today.

Our last stop this evening is with the Abu Jabara family of 9 children. This is a much livelier household than the saddest of homes we have just left. Here however, there is also heartache as the mother has breast cancer. I wonder what treatments are available for women with breast cancer in Gaza but now is not the time to ask. This family used to live in Jablayia but moved away to be in a more rural area. There is great excitement over the toys, and the children don't know which to pick. Again, there are squeals of laughter as they see themselves in digital camera. We give money for cash assistance for now.



Darkness is looming as the sun is starting to set. Ahmed is keen to leave the area, he does not want to be here in the dark. He is very uneasy this evening and this is the first I have seen him like this. I ask him if he is ok, he said he is fine, but we shouldn't be here the area isn't safe.

On the way back we stop of in Sabah's mother's garden for some tea. I like the tea here, it is way more drinkable than the coffee and it is made with mint. The guy who makes us tea, is also from the Deil El Balah area and tells me he has 11 children. He has no job and little money, life is hard, he says, and the war here made it almost unbearable. I give him some money to help with his huge family. It must be a huge worry trying to provide for so many with so little to live on. Nazem and Mohanned are waiting for us here. We sit and talk about the day. They ask about the meeting with John Ging and I tell them he is very optimistic an end to the blockade and for the future of Gaza and he is very committed to keep trying! It is important always to give hope. Life is hard enough.

My head is thumping and we stop for some paracetamol. Of the families tonight, all are in need. Of these, the greatest are the family who live closet to the border and the family with nothing in their home, not even food. I am still thinking of the girl there with only one dress to wear who has yet to eat today. Hopefully, she will at least have eaten now.

It is late as we drive back to Gaza city. We pass an open backed truck filled with sacks of flour – they are coming from the tunnels Ahmed explains. Tunnel workers also keep late hours! The girl with the one dress, no food and no chair even to sit on, is still on my mind. I have huge respect for her, I just couldn't hack her existence.



Sunset over Deil El Balah



Ahmed and Nazem, two sound guys!

It's been a long day and I will sleep tonight. I finish the rest of the UNRWA water, my head still pounding. Each night I have returned happy with the little bit of light and help we have been able to bring to those we have met, however, tonight, it is different, I feel very flat. The need and the clear suffering here is too much to witness at times, although I think in part tonight, the reason is that I know I gave false hope, for unless things change here radically, the only place Gaza is going is deeper into crisis.

I reflect on the day and on the meeting with John Ging. I ask God to keep him safe and strengthen him in his work. Of all the people I have met, he is Gaza's greatest hope here and has the persistence to keep doing what he is doing and to just possibly do what it takes to end this siege I ask God to send him a chord of angels to surround him, protect him and inspire him in his work. *"My children another weapon you have at your disposal are angels. They will surround you if you ask them. So surround yourself with all that is light and the enemy will avoid you. Ask for an honour guard of My angels and you will be enveloped in powerful beings from heaven who will insure that you complete your mission in safety"*. Also, that the angels and saints of heaven direct his steps and that God assigns a dedicated saint to guide and intercede for him.

Thinking then of the families I have met tonight, I ask Him to watch over them and hold them in the palm of His hand. I open at: *"I speak today with such love in My heart. There are those among you who suffer from financial*

need. You do not have enough money to sustain your family. Perhaps you do not have what you need to buy food or to pay for your family needs. My friends you are not forgotten, heaven will not abandon you... consider these two things as your basic needs. You are loved. You should ask me to send help and I will do so at once. My beloved children, I did not create you to go hungry. I did not create you to sleep in circumstances that prevent safety.... Ask me for help and I will help you. Be at peace. You have not been abandoned. Some of my children on earth have been blessed with great abundance. In some cases this great abundance has created a craving for more that is undermining heaven's goals for the soul. Additionally, this craving has become a distraction...My beloved ones, if this describes you, if you routinely have enough food to eat and a safe place to rest, yet you continue to worry about money, you must change your standard immediately. What will you do when the time comes to leave all this? If you have financial needs that can be rectified by cutting back on your standard of living, do so at once. I will help you and I promise you this today because this is very important for you and your family. I am asking all to reconsider their needs and use less when possible"...."The time in which you live is a time of great abundance for some. It would make God happy if this abundance was shared so that few experienced hunger that resulted in disease and death. There will always be poor people, it is true, but this fact does not excuse anyone from failing to assist them. If you are wealthy you may say, what can I do? Give, give often and give more. Work for others with your power and influence. Spread holy principles of responsible use of material and financial wealth".

I can't believe tomorrow is Friday already. The days are flying in. I make a list of to dos. I need at least another week. Tomorrow I will have to focus on raising awareness and how fundraising is going at home. I get a text to say we had a full page in The Belfast Telegraph on Wednesday. Hopefully, the bit of exposure will help bring in some money. I pray to Our Lady of Medugorje and to The Infant of Prague for assistance.

If you are in a position to help any of the families we met during our time in Gaza, please contact us at info@tuesdayschild.co.uk or [donate online](#)

[Continues to Day 12 »](#)

[Beware that this blog's entry includes disturbing imagery.](#)

Tuesday's Child Blog

Tuesday's Child Returns to Gaza – Day 12

Friday 17th July 2009

Today is my twelfth day in Gaza and the time is going so fast now. The internet is working this morning and I even have a connection to my bedroom. Good to be able to catch up with some of the stockpile of work. Later, I spend the afternoon trying to raise more awareness of this field visit to Gaza with donors, contacts and media. However, there is little media interest in our visit and the crisis here. It is very frustrating. John Ging is correct, the media have moved on from Gaza.

I receive many emails from people I have met over the last 12 days with many photographs of the war, bringing home again the horror of what happened here. The suffering was off the scale and to continue with the blockade in the light of what these people have had to endure already this year, is inhumane, too cruel for words.

One set of photos are from Raad, who helps with the food distribution programme in Northern Gaza. Some of these I have seen before, via the PCHR here, yet revisiting them is just as shocking. These tell more than words can explain.

(PLEASE NOTE THESE PHOTOS ARE DISTURBING - scroll down to view)

















Too horrific for words. And yet, still after all of this killing and pain, humanitarian aid is kept to a minimum and the siege continues. ENOUGH!

I also receive a correspondence from Dr Anwar, paediatrician at Al-Nassr, entitled War Against Children and a selection of photographs from the war, his hospital and other paediatric hospitals. Again, they are tragic, the brutality the people suffered before death, clearly evident on the faces of the corpses and the children. Again, some of these photographs, I have seen before, others are new and they defy belief.

“War on Children”, pictures collated by Dr Anwar, Consultant Paediatrician (PLEASE NOTE THESE PICTURES ARE DISTURBING)



Many children died immediately, others in hospital, some within days and some within weeks. Others watched their brothers and sisters die, parents watched children die and children watched parents die.

It is all just too horrific. Human beings should not have to endure such things.

How, they can get up and continue with their daily lives, still under this siege, after all that has happened, is quite incredible. While they say something has changed in all of them, and their spirit is broken, they have great strength and courage.

I receive a CD delivered to the hotel from the blind school we visited yesterday, a video from the Al Quds hospital under attack and in flames and a video from the concrete and cement business family of their losses. All show gross breach of human rights and in the case of the hospital breach of international humanitarian law. I badly need a dose of optimism so also watch the dvd of the Summer Games; where there is darkness there is always light!

I am taking everyone out tonight for something to eat. Sabah and her family, Fowzia and her family and Ahmed and some of his family. We go to a restaurant in the northern part of Gaza city, overlooking the sea. How very different to the restaurants of Belfast and Dublin, all bustling on a Friday night. Fowzia gives me a beautiful present of a full length embroidered Palestinian dress and I am deeply touched. And Sabah gives me a beautiful head covering. Next time I visit I must wear both and I am sure I will pass for Palestinian!

The chat and the company is good and we try and talk of other things apart from the blockade and the recent war. Important always to be upbeat here even if you don't feel like it and smile and be positive, difficult after this afternoon's emails and CDs. I am blessed that I have been able to spend so much time in Gaza. I am so thankful that I have been able to spend so much time with Sabah and Fowzia, on this visit, they are fantastic. We talk of our future plans for Tuesday's Child and I insist that they hand over Shilat so as we can claim the 10 million dollar reward! However, even if we had this kind of money, it is impossible to rebuild lives here as construction materials are still refused access. And then we revert to the possibility of buying a tunnel again. Fowzia can't believe I went into one of the tunnels, she thinks I am crazy!



With Sabah and Fowzia



Abu singing a traditional lullaby to his grandson Odia



Odia tries the local pipe!



Group photo

The sound of gunfire, from the sea, pierces the evening and a silence descends on the restaurant bringing us back to reality with quite a number of bangs. I ask what it is, and Nazem explains that it is fishermen under attack. Men out trying to fish and make a living and they are being shot at for that. Again, I am outraged. I think back to my last visit - the fishing boats were

being shot at then too. I would like to meet some of the fishermen and hear their story and ask if that would be possible. I realise it will be a squeeze as there is still so much to do as it is. Tomorrow is out, it will have to be early on Sunday morning before I leave; very early, about 6 a.m, as that is when the boats come in. Fowzia's son Raad shows me a video of inside their home after the Israeli soldiers left it. It makes for unbelievable viewing, shocking, terrible. As I watch, Fowzia cries. I put my arm round her and the tears flow. They smashed up the whole of the house, urinated and defecated on the settees, destroyed everything. Such an appalling invasion of privacy, dignity and all decency.

It has been a lovely evening, the shooting and the video apart. I am delighted that everyone has enjoyed themselves tonight. They have learned a little Irish and I have learned a little more Palestinian! I have a great love for these people and I am told I am now like one of the family. They joke as we leave that if anyone could bring Hamas and Fatah together around a table and unity between the people here, I could. I am flattered by their vote of confidence, it would be a tall order, however, I assure them, if they can set up a meeting, before I leave on Sunday, I would certainly be more than happy to give it a go! Bring it on! But not tonight, I am cream crackered, tired to the bone.

Tonight, I open "Heaven speaks to families" from Direction for Our Times, at a section where Our Lady speaks to children. *"There are many souls on earth who do not understand that God is the One who is in charge of everything. These people think they are in charge and they are trying to be God. This is a mistake for them and they must change. All people must understand that God created the world and every person in the world. God allows the sun to shine. God allows the rain to fall. If God did not allow these things to happen, these things would stop. We must always thank God for making the world so beautiful for us. When you thank God for making the world and making you, He is happy and He sends even more graces down on the world. Graces are good things that come from heaven. So you must join me, Mary, and ask God for more graces from heaven for the world. Will you do that? Will you help me? Today we will say, "God in heaven, you are the Creator of all things. Please send your graces down upon the world". I thank you, dear children. I love you very much. I will help you in everything"*.

Such beautiful words, simple, true and full of love and tender care, just the way a mother should speak to a child. Yet, how difficult it must be for the children of Gaza to give thanks to God, for their little world is far from beautiful. I ask God to pour down his graces on this little corner of the world. I also ask him especially to watch over my friends and their children.

I am already asleep as my head hits the pillow.

If you are in a position to help any of the families we met during our time in Gaza, please contact us at info@tuesdayschild.co.uk or [donate online](#)

[Continues to Day 13 »](#)

Tuesday's Child Blog

Tuesday's Child Returns to Gaza – Day 13

Saturday 18th July 2009

Today starts at 10 a.m. at the food distribution in Jabalyia, for families in the feeding programme from Jabalyia town and Jabalyia refugee camp. The system is the same in each area, families enrolled in the programme bring their food coupon to the shop and can choose what they want up to 200 shekels. The store owners usually apply 10 percent overage allowance. Each family has a unique identifier number and most also bring that with them.



Main mode of transport in Jabalyia



I am here to see how the programme is going and to meet and talk to some of the families and the children. When I visited in August 2008, to the distribution centre in the Middle area, the families I met were very happy with the system. My main concerns are, how the war has affected the quantity of food to each family, as internal food prices have increased. Earlier in the week, I visited the food store in Gaza city.

I recognise a few of the faces here this morning doing their food shopping from the families I visited in the area last week. Many others, this is my first time to meet them and I look forward to hearing their views and how the programme is working for them.

The first lady I meet this morning is Mrs El Masry, 42 yrs old who lives in Beit Hanoun. I ask her to tell me a little bit about herself. She has 14 children, the eldest girl is disabled and her husband is ill with a heart condition. They have been part of the food programme since the beginning. The family are all still living in their home, but it is badly damaged and the roof was blown off in the war, but they have no materials to fix it and would need money to get materials if they become available. The food helps a little, but having such a large family, it does not last long, only for a week and so it's not nearly

enough. However, as they are refugees they also get food from the UNRWA programme so between the two supplies, she can manage, with the help also of neighbours and family. I ask how much money it would take to feed her family comfortably per month; she says 600 shekels. We arrange to give her cash assistance for the months ahead.



The next lady I meet is Sharifa, whom we met last week and also bought a washing machine for – she is still smiling. She is delighted with the food programme, she has 1 children and the food lasts for 10 -14 days. It would be impossible for her family to survive without it. We have already given cash assistance to Sharifa. She is choosing a little extra for her family this month.

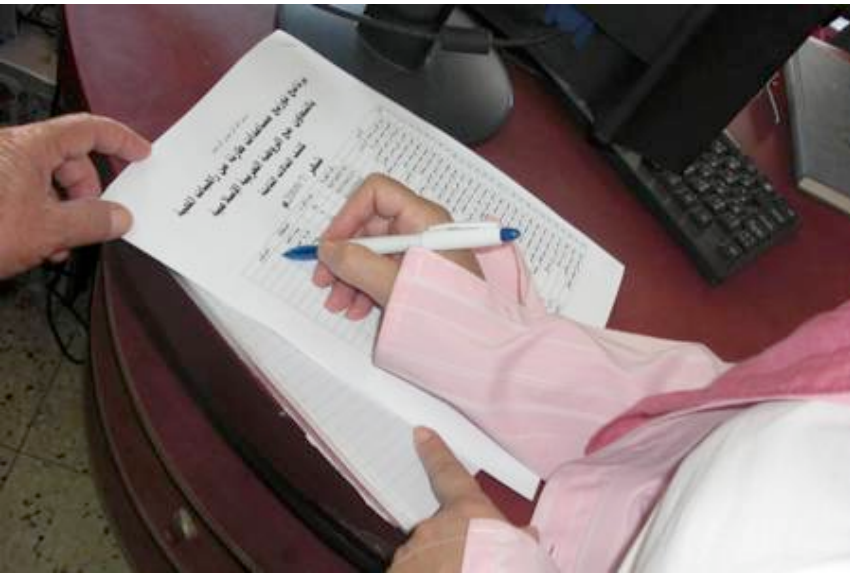
As the families come in, Sabah ticks them off the list. Later when they choose all their food and have it totalled at the till, an adult representative of the family must sign for the food. The system is very well organised. Sabah is a qualified accountant and her systems are very organised. Families also have the option of cleaning materials as well as food.



Sharifa, proud owner of her first washing machine, still smiling!



Sabah in the supermarket



Sabah checking families with coupons against the monthly list

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

برنامج توزيع مساعدات طارئة من راضيات المحبة
بالتعاون مع الروضة العربية الإسلامية
كشف الحالات القائمة
أكتوبر / 2009م

الرقم	الاسم	رقم الهوية	عدد افراد	المنطقة	التوزيع
1	عبد الكريم احمد الربازي	907400741	16	بيت لاهيا	
2	أشوية احمد عديرة	903306223	9	عزبة عديرة	
3	شريفه ابراهيم المصري	916103641	12	بيت حنون	
4	حسن زكي حسن عليان	905378493	5	بيت لاهيا	
5	امين احمد محمد ابو خاطر	925732919	10	جبا ليا	
6	محمد يوسف عبد	951177740	7	جبا ليا	
7	محمد حمد محمد التمس	908973449	12	عزبة	
8	طه هاشم مفاظ	900918780	7	بيت لاهيا	
9	خالد وديع عوض ريحان	910733237	8	جبا ليا	
10	مهيب احمد عبداله	900951534	6	بيت لاهيا	
11	مصالح ابراهيم فرحان	959962986	9	بيت لاهيا	
12	ماهر علي نياض مهرة	903409472	4	جبا ليا	
13	خاطر محمد محمد مهرة	901877357	10	الشيخ رشوان	
14	يوسف سلامة العطار	936185784	6	العطاره	
15	سعادته مظهر ابو حنيفة	902306240	11	العطاره	
16	شاهر هاشم العطار	925869141	13	العطاره	
17	سهيل محمد عوض	801284720	6	عزبة	
18	احمد اسماعيل العطار	924459845	7	العطاره	
19	هيام نياض مهرة	903292506	6	جبا ليا	
20	راند علي نياض مهرة	901485466	5	جبا ليا	
21	سيف محمد محمد عويضة	928646447	11	جبا ليا	
22	سعد احمد محمود الرحل	990753104	9	بيت لاهيا	
23	شاهر احمد نواف خاطر	901559970	6	العطاره	
	يوزين هاشم عبدالعطار مفاظ	906666243	6	العطاره	
	يوسف زكي زكي صبح	801759663	6	العطاره	
	يوسف زكي زكي صبح	926422163	6	العطاره	
	يوسف زكي زكي صبح	976477471	7	عزبة	
	يوسف زكي زكي صبح	925869851	6	العطاره	
	يوسف زكي زكي صبح		4	العطاره	

Monthly list of family names for this area, the 2nd column lists numbers of children in each home



Families collect their groceries and the value is totalled at the till

The next couple we meet are Mr and Mrs Thani Abu Hanbeed. They have 9 children and also live in Beit Hanoun. They are relatively new to the programme, joining it just after the war. I ask Mrs Abu Hanbeed how she finds the programme. *“This coupon is very important for us and especially for my children. It makes a big difference to us as it covers the basic things.*

Sometimes, very occasionally, I get them some treats. Generally, the food lasts us for about 10 days". I ask how they manage on other days. "Some days we just have tomatoes and potatoes. Some days we have bread in black tea, sometimes we have nothing. Sometimes, family and neighbours help us too. It is very difficult, there is no work here. But really, this food coupon has made a difference to us, thank you so much". I ask what other urgent needs they have at the moment apart from food and water. "Our house was badly damaged and we need money and materials to fix it. We have cleaned it up but the damage is still the same as it was from the war and I worry for when the winter and cold weather will come. We also need money for the children going back to school, for school materials and also for clothes".



Mr and Mrs Thani Abu Hanbeed selecting groceries



Selection of one family

The next lady I stop to speak to is Shafeka Mohammed Abo Joba. She tells me a little bit about her family. *"I have 6 children and they have benefited from the food programme from the beginning. It is wonderful and has made such a difference to us. The food lasts us for about 10 days. My husband had a heart attack after the war, he is not well since. Our roof fell down, we live in old Jablayia town and all of the house is very badly damaged. It was terrible, the worst attack yet, for many years, but at least we are all alive. Many of my neighbours have lost loved ones. I am very lucky that we are all safe".* I ask her to tell me what she has chosen for her family this morning and she says: *"rice, cheese, eggs, pasta, sugar, tuna, tea and juice so far"* and she shows me where she is collecting her food. No shopping baskets or trolleys in Gaza! I ask what her other needs are currently, *"monies for the my*

husband for the hospital and also for me to go to the dentist. And school materials and clothes for the children". I thank her for taking time to talk to me. "Please continue the programme, don't stop it, we couldn't manage if you stopped it". I assure her that we have no intention of stopping it, God willing, that we are just here to see how it is going and she gives thanks to God. They are a very devout people, they mention God and give thanks, constantly.



Shafeika Mohammed Abo Joba at Jabalyia food distribution

I notice as I walk around the small store, that while there are refrigerated items such as butter and cheese, there is no milk and also no fresh meat, only tinned meat and tinned fish. There is no refrigerated transport so not possible to get fresh goods like these through the border or indeed through the tunnels. The lack of fresh meat and produce generally would in part explain the high incidence of anaemia. I also note that, so far, none of the families have bought any fruit or vegetables. I ask about things like chicken. It is possible, I am told, to buy a chicken, but you buy it live and take it home in a cage and it is expensive.

repairing them. *“My children have been in the food programme from the beginning, it is great, really, we could not survive without it, but it is not enough, the food only lasts for 10 days”*. I ask her what her other most urgent needs are *“materials to fix our home and school uniforms, school bags and shoes for the children”* she says.

Mrs Abed Lhai Mohra approaches me and asks if she can speak with me. She introduces herself with the help of a translator. *“Hello, I am from Jabalyia and I have 6 children. Our family have been part of the food distribution programme from the beginning. I am so grateful for the help that your organisation gives us, it makes such a difference. We pray to God that it will continue, please don't stop the food”*. Again, for the second time this morning I reassure her that we are not here to do that, but to see how the programme is going and what more we can try to do”. I ask how long the food lasts her family *“About 2 weeks usually, but that is ok, before this there was nothing only bread in black tea, now I can be sure that my children have food every day for sure for 2 weeks at least and we ask God to help us the rest of the time”*. She introduces me to her cousin, who also lives with her. She has been widowed since she was 25 yrs old. She has one daughter who is badly anaemic and she has no money for medicines for her. I ask both these ladies, Naheda and Nalem, what their other most urgent needs are. *“Supplies for the children for school, stationery, shoes and uniforms”*, she says, *“the hardest times are when the children are sick, several of them are sick with infections at the moment”*. I ask what it was like for her family in the war. *“It is hard to describe how terrifying it was. We moved 3 times during the war, each time because it was so dangerous, we moved to family and friends both, it was exhausting. Our own home is very badly damaged but we are very lucky that we are alive. Some of my children's friends were killed in the war and they have taken badly affected by their deaths, they have nightmares and are afraid of the dark and afraid to be left on their own even for a short time. The least bang and they cry”*. Her cousin adds *“my daughter's best friend also died, her family were all in one room, metal fell from the roof and she died in hospital from the head injury. She does not understand why her friend had to die; it is very hard to explain war and hatred to a child”*.



Basma Hawha, who has 7 children at home including 3 orphaned children



Naheda and Nalem Mohra, cousins



Naheda signs that she has filled her food coupon

The next couple we meet are Mr and Mrs Fowket from Beit Lahyia. They have 8 children including a 3 yr old girl with cerebral palsy. They lost their home in the war, it was completely destroyed. I ask where they are now and they tell me in a “store for cows donated to them by a farmer”, a cow shed. I ask about the food programme, and Mrs Fowket says, “*the monthly food coupon makes a huge difference to us, we have been part of the programme from the beginning. The food used to last for about 2 weeks but now with the increase in prices, we don’t get as much for the coupon and it only lasts for about 10 days*”. I ask, apart from more food for the rest of the month, what else they need. “*Money for medicines for my daughter and husband and money for school uniforms and shoes for the children. Also, we badly need a fan as the cow store is so hot*”. I ask if we can call with her later at home and she kindly agrees. We make a note about the fan. I saw some good ones in the shop we bought the washing machine last week. As for the school uniforms and shoes and materials for school, this is a need across all of the 300 families, and we will have to start a back to school campaign. We also need to increase the food allocation, realistically to double the current funding. However, fundraising at home is difficult, just not the same money there, but we will have to think of new strategies.



Mr and Mrs Mocket who have 8 children and lost their home in Operation Cast Lead

I notice a little boy I recognise. I met him last week with his family in Jabalyia. I say hi and that it is good to see he is helping with the shopping. I am glad that with the cash assistance last week, he and his brothers and sisters

will be getting a little more this month.



The small supermarket also turns into a health clinic. I am inundated with requests from families about health issues asking for help. Here this morning, I would need to be a dermatologist, dentist and neurologist. No eye problems today! I explain I cannot help them directly, but we will take note of the requests and see if we can refer them on to those who can help. This is one of the hardest things I find about this visit, the many requests for help that we are not in a direct position to address – transfers of seriously ill children out of Gaza for treatment, requests to help leave Gaza to go and live with family abroad, requests for materials to rebuild damaged houses, requests for specialist care. What we can do however, is help with food, medicines, school supplies, clothes and shoes, we will just have to raise more money to help people with their needs and pray for more Divine Providence.



Lady asks for diagnosis and treatment for skin condition



Mother asks for help with child who has difficulty walking



Woman asks for referral to dentist



Mother asks for help for daughter's palate defect

I also recognise some of the other families here in the store this morning. Three of the large Eade family from Jablayia and Mr Abed, father of 10 children, who featured in the film of Gaza we made in September 2008 of the humanitarian crisis here.



The Eade family from Jabalyia



Mr Abed, father of 10, who featured in the film we made of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza last year

The owner of the supermarket is here this morning and I thank him for the little bit of discount he gives to every family and he thanks us for our business. I also thank him for helping families who run out of food completely as he has done on often and for helping with the food baskets during the war. I have to stock up on more sweets as we will be visiting some of the camps later today so decide to shop here. He kindly donates a large bag on the house! Happy days!



It is now 12.30 p.m and we are behind schedule. It is clear from the time here that the families like the programme, the food coupons are making a difference, however, we really need to at least double the food allocation to each family per month and that will take a lot more money. We currently have to raise £10,500 sterling per month for 300 families and 2000 children. Doubling the food allocation will require £21,000 per month. The Belfast marathon in May was a huge effort and yet it only raised just over £4100 for Gaza. We will need to source new funding streams!

On now, to visit the Hajaj family in Gaza city. Mrs Hajaj's 25 yr old son was killed on the first day of Operation Cast Lead. He was hit by a rocket just outside the front door of the family home and she found him "*decapitated with his brain lying on the street*". She cries and is inconsolable as she speaks of her youngest son and the horror of his death. Her husband suffers from a mental illness, he is sleeping when we call. Her own health is poor, she has a heart condition and needs surgery. She is here with 3 of her grandchildren, to one of her sons, Donia 10 yrs, Essa 8 yrs and Yaizen 6 yrs. They have just had their lunch of bread soaked in black tea. Another grandchild is in hospital with meningitis. Mrs Hajaj shows me around their home and the damage to the roof of the house during the war, then outside to where her son was killed, just about 10 feet from the doorway. I go into the kitchen and there is no food, nothing. Sabah opens the fridge and in it two crusts of bread and one small tomato. This family are part of the food distribution programme in Gaza city,

but now 3 weeks into the month, they are out of food. They literally have no food in the house and it really hits home that we will need to increase the monthly coupon value. I give her cash assistance for food over the coming months, she cries and hugs and kisses me many times. Again, it is so very humbling. I ask about the children. Their mother abandoned them when the baby, Yaizen, was 2 months old. She has since re-married into a family that has a little money and wants nothing more to do with her children. The children, on the advice of Sabah, went with their grandmother, bearing small gifts, to visit their mother but she refused to see them. There has been no contact since, not even during the war.



Fami Ayisha Hajaj and her 3 grandchildren Donia, Essa and Yaizen



Two crusts of bread and small tomato, only food in the Hajaj home

I talk to the children and ask them if they like school and what their favourite subject is; they all say Arabic. I also ask what they want to be when they grow up. The eldest Donia would like to be a doctor and the younger ones both want to be teachers – of arabic! We open the bag of toys to choose things and also give them some sweets. I ask the grandmother if she will get some good food for them today and she says she will go to the shops as soon as we go.

This is a very sad story, hunger, bereavement and abandonment in this home.

Children's lives don't get much worse than this.



Mr Hajaj asleep in the yard

I promise to send more money soon and we leave Mrs Hajaj, her burdens lessened just a little for now. If something happens to her, what will become of these children?

We drive on to the camps of displaced people living in tents. There are several large camps and I am keen to visit all of them, for we have a lot of toys and also cash assistance to distribute. I also want to find the woman and child I met on my first day of the trip; she has been on my mind, as that day, it was impossible to give her anything. Ahmed says we cannot possibly find this woman, however I never accept no for an answer and so we start with this camp in Elatatra in Beit Lahyia. Indeed, Ahmed, is not happy about driving into the camps and tells me it is crazy and we will get mobbed. I assure him that I can handle it and that I have gone into camps in Bosnia and, with a bit of assertiveness and crowd control, distribution of aid is possible.

It is not as busy here as the last day. I take some photos of the children and again seeing themselves on digital camera is a source of great amusement. No sweets and toys here yet though, I will follow Ahmed's recommendation and wait until just I before we leave to distribute everything.



Children from the camp



More children from the camp

It is 1.30 p.m and the heat is burning. The skin on my arms and face is scorching. I doubt any of these kids are wearing sun factor. We decide on a different strategy today leaving the toys and sweets in the car in case we are mobbed again and the four of us walk into the camp. I start on the left side at one large tent and the father of the family invites me in. If it was hot outside, inside the tent is like a sauna.

Here in this first tent, I meet the Abu Laila family of 14. The first thing I notice is the clothes some of the children are wearing, jumpers and fleeces, far too warm for this heat, they must be sweltered. And then I realise they are probably the same winter clothes, distributed after the war and when many had no blankets even. I ask how they lost their home. Their father explains, *“It was the second week of the war, Israeli soldiers came into the area at 3 a.m. in the morning. There was shouting and shooting and tanks everywhere. We fled our home in the clothes we were wearing and made in to the nearest UNRWA school. We were running hard, we took nothing with us; there was no time. We were lucky to escape, others were not so lucky. As we ran there was shooting all around us, but we kept running as a family. When we returned after the war, the house was completely destroyed, we lost everything. The government here gave each family who lost their home 2000 dollars, we bought a fridge, and a TV and food. We decided a fridge and TV, to use between electricity cuts, would be the most benefit to the children”*. I glance at the TV connected to an outside power cable that looks far from safe, and who is on the screen but Obama! A pity he isn't here in this tent in person! *“Maybe he will make a difference to Gaza”*, I suggest, *“Enchala, enchala”*, they say, which means we hope, with the help of God. I ask about work. *“I used to work selling a few vegetables that I grew beside the house, but now I can't even do this as our donkey was killed in the war”*, Mr Abu Laila says. I ask how much a donkey would cost in Beit Lahyia and am told 700 USD, so same as in the Middle Area.

His wife continues the story. *“We had all our savings in the home, 5000 shekels, there was no time to take it and when we went back to our house the money was gone. My husband and I spent all of our lives building this home for our family, I even sold the jewellery I owned to help build this home for us, now we have nothing, it was all we had and our savings are gone also”* and she breaks down and sobs. Her husband continues, *“I am not Hamas, I am not Fatah, I don't want to know anything about politics, I am just an ordinary man trying to do the best for my family. Why did they destroy our*

home? We should not have to live like this at this stage of our lives". I ask what the family had for lunch today and am told tomatoes and salt. I ask what they need and am told "money for food, medicines (Mr Abu Laila is diabetic), clothes, shoes, school supplies and a new home!".

"Do the children go to school?" I ask. "Yes they can go to school when they start again in September, but I don't know how we can send them without proper clothes and supplies. Also, after the war, one of my youngest children Mohammed refused to and go to school, he was too afraid to leave us".

Again, lots of high career aspirations in this tent - doctors, teachers and journalists and the children enjoy the questions. I tell Mohammed, if I was him I would be afraid to go to school too but if he wants to be a teacher he will have to be brave and go back to school in September. I wonder where they will find the money to educate so many children to achieve their potential? I ask the children what they are brilliant at and again, every time, surprise faces initially all around and then the answers flow – arabic, drawing, weaving, science, football, summer games!

The heat is now unbearable in this tent. Talking to families takes time as, while some have a little English, usually it is with two-way translation at a pace of a sentence or two. Sabah, Mohammed and Ahmed tell me later that my trip is doing wonders for their English! Unfortunately my Arabic is not up to the same power, although at least now I can say, good morning, how are you, what is your name, my name is Orla and I am from Ireland, what was it like for you in the war, thank God, God be with you, I hope things will go well for you, how many days does the food last your family, you are welcome, good, excellent and cheers - an improvement on my hello, good-bye and thank you from last year!



The Abu Laila family from Beit Lahyia, one of thousands, who lost their home in the war



Mohammed 6 yrs, too afraid to go to school and leave his parents

I thank the Abu Laila family and tell them I have toys for all the children and will give them out later and also cash assistance for their family. As we leave their tent, I notice a woman who is very like the woman I met here on the first day. She turns and I realise it is her. I am delighted to find her and I give Ahmed a oh ye of little faith wink. I go over to her tent and say hello. With the help of translation, I apologise that we were unable to give her anything the first day given the situation but that I am glad that we found her and her family again. Her name is Linda and her husband is Hamed. They have two children Waleed 6 yrs and Noha 18 months. It is Noha whom I met the first day and she is still crying, still distressed. I notice how sunburnt all of this family are. I ask them if they would tell me what happened their home during the war. They kindly offer us some tea, but we decline, explaining we have many to visit. The heat in this tent is also unbearable. Hamed says “*Our house was in Beit Lahyia. During the 2nd week of the war Israeli soldiers came into the house where 26 of our family and neighbours were gathered. Everyone was crying and afraid and in the commotion the 4 of us escaped. We watched then as our home was demolished by a tank. It was completely destroyed. All around other houses were being demolished and people, just ordinary people, were shot at. It is hard to describe how bad it was, it was hard to believe this was happening. They have come in many times before and demolished houses and shot at people and children but they have never destroyed homes and killed to this extent. I took my wife and children into Jabalyia camp but later I was caught and arrested and taken to a jail in Israel for 10 days. I ask what jail was like and the young man’s eyes look wounded. “Terrible, I was interrogated for hours, badly beaten and*

mistreated. I did not think I would see my family again”. I tell them we have cash assistance for them and toys and sweets for the children I will give it to them after we visit the other tents.



Linda, Ahmed, Waleed and Noha who also lost their home

We walk through the camp to a fenced area where there are three tents behind a corrugated iron gate. Here we meet Wafa who is working on a little garden she has started outside the main tent. I ask her if we can come in and meet her family and she kindly obliges. Again, I notice she is quite sunburnt; yogurt sits on parts of her face where she has tried to soothe the sun burn. I ask about the war and how she lost her home. *“I lost not only my home but also my 9 yr old son Abraham”*. She tells me her story. *“We lived in Elatatra in Beit Lahiya. Israeli soldiers invaded the area the 2nd week of the war. It was terrifying; they were ordering everyone out of their houses, yelling at people and pushing them with their guns. There was a lot of shooting and screaming, it was really crazy, out of control. Just before they came to our home, we managed to escape through a window at the back, my husband and I carried the two youngest children and we all ran as fast as we could to the trees. We left with nothing, not even food, but we were relieved we had escaped. We spent 4 days hiding in the outdoors under the trees, we had no food or water. The children were starving so myself and my husband and my two eldest sons decided to go back to our home to get food. The house was completely destroyed, everything except the bathroom. I remember thinking it was so strange that the bathroom was untouched but all around everything was flattened. However, they were waiting for us and they starting shooting. We ran and they shot my 9 yr old son, he was badly hit, my husband picked him up and ran with him but they shot my husband in the side and continued shooting at my son. And they killed him. My Abraham. I thought we would all be killed. I screamed at my husband to leave him and the three of us continued run. Even though my son was already dead, the soldiers stood over his body and continued to shoot him, 150 times. The other children could see everything and they were deeply traumatised, not only watching their brother be killed but so many bullets pumped into his body and thinking we would also be killed. Meanwhile my husband was bleeding.*

The Red Cross could not access the area and my son’s body lay on the ground. My husband was also in need of attention. From where we were hiding we continued to watch for an opportunity to get to my dead son. The soldiers slowly moved and we stayed under the trees but no help came. Eventually after 4 days and still no food, we saw a Bedouin farmer with a donkey and cart, and we begged him for help. He helped us put my son’s now

rotting body on the cart and we all went with him to the hospital where they prepared his corpse for burial. His little body was riddled with bullets. She shows me a picture of Abraham - the same large A3 poster is in different areas of the tents.

One of my sons was taken by an NGO to Poland for help him deal with his trauma. He was there with other children from the war for 3 weeks. He had a lovely room and good food and clean clothes and medical treatment, but then after the 3 weeks, he had to come back here and the readjustment to living here after some comfort was very hard for him, too difficult”.

I give her my condolences on the loss of Abraham, she thanks me, saying that he is in heaven and she is expecting another baby. I ask what life is like in the tents. *“In the beginning it was really hard, really, difficult and it was cold and there wasn't enough food. Then a wealthy man from United Arab Emirates donated daily lunch of chicken and rice to every person in the camp and that really helped, proper food every day. Also UNRWA and Unicef helped us and each gave us extra tents and now with 3 tents in our patch, we use one as a living room, one as a kitchen and one as a bedroom”.* Also, in one area, I note a wardrobe converted into a shower, a hose for the water. I tell her she has made the tents very homely and I am impressed with the small garden she has made. She smiles and thanks me. It would be easier if Abraham was here with us, we all miss him.



Wafa, mother of 9 children, who lost her 9 yr old son Abraham was shot by Israeli soldiers 150 times



Three of Wafa's girls play outside the tent

I thank Wafa again and ask her to walk with us to the car, as we have toys and cash assistance for her. It is clear she is a very strong woman. As we approach the car, many other families are already gathered and many invite us into their tents to hear their stories. Ahmed says no, there are too many people around now, and he wants to leave soon. There are about 50 children around me as we arrive at the car and I wonder how the word has spread so quickly and then I realise, all they needed to do is to look into the large van to see toy heaven.

I tell all the children, with Ahmed and Mohammed's help, to stand back as there are things for everyone, and initially they do, but then when the dolls, footballs, colouring books, crayons, bubbles and bears start to make an appearance, there is huge excitement bordering on mass hysteria and it all goes a bit crazy. I have kids clambering all over me, others holding onto me and pulling at my clothes and others trying to get past and make it into the van. I don't mind but Ahmed is getting cross now. I tell them all to stand back there is enough for everyone and can already see that some children have three or four things each. Again, so what and, they are having great fun, but giving out sweets here is just not going to be possible. I ask the parents then to step in and help to control the children, they are also unable to, so I hand other supplies over the heads of the children to each of the parents, some now also crowding and holding out their hands and begging money. I have made a pigs ear of this and my technique from Bosnia just isn't working here. Only Wafa and Linda stand back. I cannot get through the crowd now to give them their envelopes of cash assistance and Sabah and Ahmed decide it is time to get go. I try and reach them from the car window, but it isn't possible. Ahmed drives away, he is very cross now, however I tell him he and his family don't have to live here in these conditions. Children are running after the van, there are no other vehicles so I open the window and throw more footballs to them and they are over the moon with their catch. One child is still sprinting after the car, quite some distance, before giving up the chase. God love them, they have nothing. Why wouldn't they go mad with the excitement of the arrival of a mobile toy shop? Ahmed is still cross. We will have to think of another strategy to distribute money and aid here! As for toys and games and crafts, not sure, what is the best way to do it. I ask if we can go to the other camps but that is out of the question now.

We go back to Sabah's home to take a break from the heat and have some cold drinks. Today is the hottest day yet. We discuss the experience of the camps and make arrangements for getting the cash assistance to these families

next week. It is clear that these families need particular help. While they have more food here than some of the families I have met, the living conditions are dire as are the lack of clothes and protection from the sun. The heat of the tents must also make them very dehydrated. Also, what will happen in the winter when it gets cold? It is terrible that these people, who have lost their homes, have no possibility of being re-housed in even temporary accommodation 6 months on. Also, a 2000 dollar payment from the government per household is terrible particularly in light of the thriving tunnel economy.

Time now to return to homes close to the industrial area. The landscape here is a mess, utterly depressing, mound after mound of rubble, all former homes either bombed or demolished by tanks. Some houses are completely flattened, others stand as part shells. All around, rubble, twisted metal and endless dust. Such a hopeless environment with no sign of any new builds. To obliterate people's homes and then leave them like this is too cruel. Here families still live in makeshift homes among the rubble.



Site of former home



Former home reduced to rubble



Former home reduced to rubble



Former home reduced to rubble



Ruin of a former home



Ruin of a former home

As we walk through the area, families come out to meet us and as everywhere we go, children gather. One woman shows us her former home, her husband died during the collapse of it. They pulled him out of the rubble and tried to revive him. There was no ambulance or red cross so neighbours put him in a car and drove him to hospital but he died.



Widow with 4 of her 6 children, who live close to their former home



Remains of collapsed home that killed their father

Just a short way a long, we meet a man who lost both of sons, they were both policemen. One son had 2 children and the other son 1 child and he looks after all 3 children now. Mr Nady Abu Dradona introduces us to his grandchildren. All of the children are red headed, they look very Irish! The red hair gene descends from the time of the crusades. So many little lives shattered. I think of another statistic - on the first day of the war, 50 policemen were graduating at their graduation ceremony, all were killed.



Abdullah 5 yrs and Doriah 6 yrs, orphaned in the war



Grandfather of Doriah and Abdullah with their cousin Mamoud who lost his father also



Street of former houses reduced to piles of rubble



Former row of houses completely decimated

We drive on towards the industrial area, picking up Mohammed on the way. I met Mohammed last week, formerly a successful businessman who owned a concrete and construction company here with his brothers.



En route to the industrial area

We pass a makeshift mosque, one of many here where people gather to pray. Statistics suggest that 30 mosques were completely destroyed and 15 were partially destroyed. In one case a mosque full of people at prayer was bombed killing 15 and injuring 30.

As to schools, a reported 200 schools were damaged including 36 UNRWA schools. He attacks on clearly civilian areas such as mosques and schools again confirm that this was a war on civilians.



Makeshift mosque

We arrive at the industrial area and Mohammed shows us the factories here that were completely destroyed including 5 concrete factories and one juice factory. Everywhere here is a scene of mass destruction. It's a mess and there is no equipment or means to clean it up, nothing can get through.

All of Mohammed's brothers and sisters lived in this area, close to their business and all of their houses were completely destroyed, bar one, used as a military base. He shows us his former home and even the place where he left his car, also destroyed. He has lost everything, his home and his business and there is no possibility of compensation.

We enter the house that was left to use as a military base. It is completely trashed. Here on one wall, a pictorial representation of their plan to destroy 5 homes and retain one for operations. Every room is a mess. Only the kitchen remains partially intact, cupboards here designated by soldiers for specific things – food, medicines etc.

There is graffiti and writing all over the walls. This seems to be a common theme. Over the last few weeks I have seen a lot of this ranging from the engraving of a star of David after a killing, deaths recorded like football scores e.g. Israel 8 – Palestine 0, and a particularly chilling one, "*prepare to die soon*". Here on this wall, outside a room where 3 elderly women and 1 man were kept in captivity without food, water or access to a bathroom is written "*enclosure for animals*". I am later told by an Israeli that this is perhaps one of the greatest insults to a Palestinian.

We drive to what is left of his company, his sons also benefiting from the toys and the bubbles go down a treat.

The sun is starting to set and the light is particularly beautiful. It casts an orange glow across the devastation, lighting up the darkness.



Remains of home in industrial area



Remains of home in industrial area



Remains of home in industrial area



Remains of home in industrial area



Mohammed in the grounds of his former home



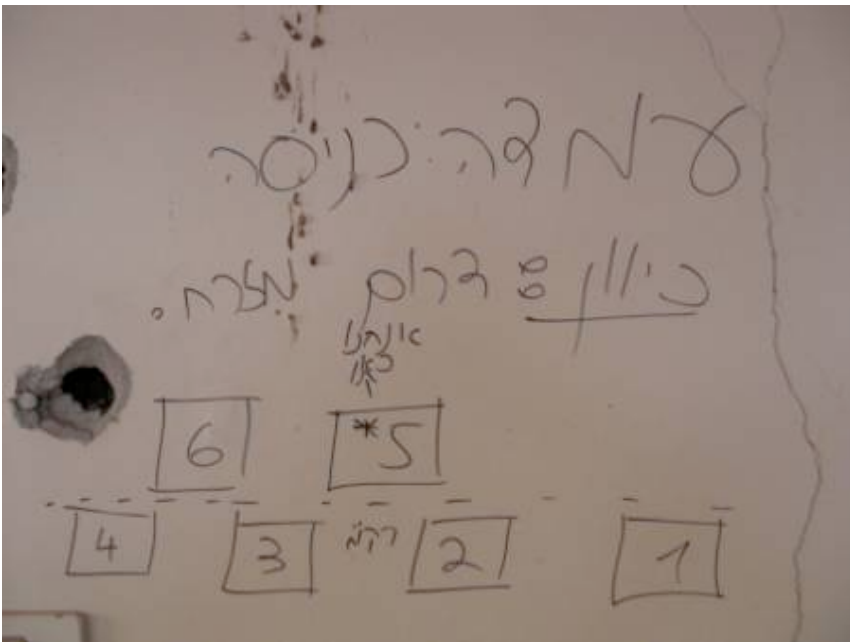
Mohammed at the front of his former home shows us where his car was parked, also destroyed



Mohammed's son, Ahmed, in the ruins of his former home



One family home retained as military base



Military plan deciding to keep one home and destroy 5 others

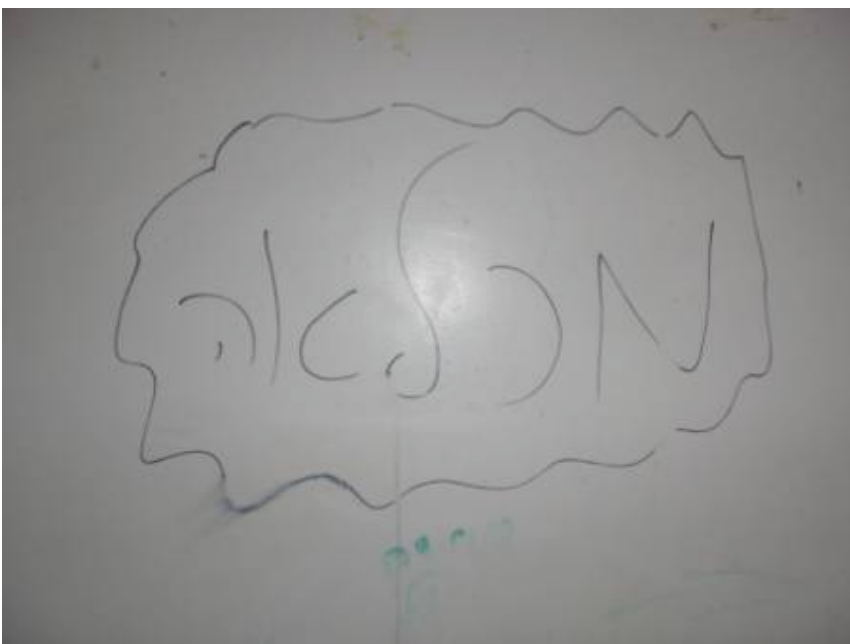
I am not sure I could live back in a house that had been occupied and trashed like this; still they have little option. Upstairs, from the balcony, panoramic scenes of destruction and Gaza city in the distance. The sun is starting to set and the warm light above is in stark contrast to the grey misery below.



Kitchen remains with cupboards allocated for specific items e.g. medicines, food



Every room in this house is trashed



“Enclosure for animals” written on wall outside room where elderly held without food/water



View from side of house



View from back of house



View from upstairs of house – sunset over Gaza city

Outside Mohammed's nephews play with his son and we give them toys also. Again blowing bubbles is the most fun.



Toys for the boys



Blowing bubbles

Time to go now and we leave the industrial area just as the sun is setting. There is something special in the sunset tonight, as if there is a celestial presence in it, like one often sees in the striking skies of Medugorje.



Sunset over Gaza city

It is dark now as we make our final stop today to visit Abd and his family. Abd is 17 yrs old and is paralysed. He was shot in the March 2008 incursion while checking the water level in the water tank on top of the house. He is lying on a bed in the courtyard area of his home, it is cooler for him here. His father speaks for a long time about his illness and what happened him, he is paralysed, has renal failure and is need of surgery. It is also clear he has an infection for his urine bag is bloody and cloudy and he has a temperature. I suggest that he may have a bladder infection and needs to see a doctor soon. I notice Abd listening to all of the adults talking about him but not with him. I ask Abd if I can talk with him and if he can tell me in his own words how he is feeling now.



“I am not feeling so well, I am more sick than last month and I am weary of all the treatments and still feeling unwell”, he explains.

I ask if he feels up to telling me what happened him. *“Sure, no problem. It was March time and I went to top of the house to check the water in the water tank. My father told me not to leave the house as there were Israeli soldiers all over the area, but we needed water and there was no water coming from the tank. I had just checked the tank and as I was walking down the ladder, I could hear voices and steps, however I could not see anyone. I stopped and did not move. The next thing I felt a stab of pain in my back, I checked it with my hand and I was covered in blood. I fell from the ladder onto the roof of the house and that is all I remember. I don’t know how long afterwards it was but the next thing I was in Shifa hospital, I wakened and there were patients on either side. It was then they told me what happened me and that I was paralysed”.*

His father filla in the rest. My daughter came running to get me to say Abd was shot. He was bleeding everywhere and unresponsive. We called the ambulances and also the Red Cross but they could not get through to the area for 4 hrs. We tried to stop the bleeding, but it was impossible. He almost bled to death. They said in the hospital that his haemoglobin was 2. They gave him blood and fluids and worked hard on him for many hours, he was alive thank God, but the bullet severed his spine. He was shot in the back, right in the middle of his spine, they chose their spot. It was not cross fire, there was no shooting, it was a direct hit. Abd was not recovering well so he was transferred finally to a hospital in Egypt, however with restrictions here, neither I or his mother were allowed to go with him so he went alone. He was very brave. The care however in this hospital was poor and when he was returned to us, he had 3 large pressure sores, 2 to the bone. He also had pressure sores on both his feet. He was a mess. His main problem now is his kidneys, the doctor says Abd has renal failure. He has a catheter now and a bag.



I ask what we can do to help. Medicines and bags and treatments are expensive, and we need help with these. The pads are very costly, 500 shekels per month and the urine bags are 100 shekels per month. Many people have come to meet Abd and hear his story, they have taken notes and offered help but they never follow-up. I give Abd's mother money for his medical needs for the next few months and promise to send more. I ask Abd, if there is anything at all he would like to have for himself, not medicines and treatment, but for him *"I used to like sports and exercise, I was strong, but now my body is very weak. I would like to get well again and get stronger in my body. I would also like to be well enough to get a job and work"*, he says. *"What else, do you enjoy?"* I ask, *"I used to enjoy football but that is finished for me"*, he says. *"What about things you can still do"*, I ask him. *"I enjoy listening to music especially arabic music and I used to like art and painting, I suppose I could still do that. I am also interested in computers, maybe this is an area I could work in if I get well"*. I tell him I think that is a great plan and ask if there is anything else he would like for himself. He smiles, but I guess it is hard to talk with a big audience. His father says he would like a laptop but he is too shy to ask. I ask Abd if this is what he would like and he says yes and I promise him a laptop and he gives me a smile. He has a beautiful smile. His father then asks me to look at his wounds, so I agree after asking everyone else to leave. His worst pressure sore is on his right buttock, terrible. This should have healed, it looks as if it is trying to heal, but perhaps his general ill health is not helping nor is his nutritional status, he is very thin. I will send the photos to a specialist at home and ask for an opinion. I say good-bye to Abd and that I hope to see him much better on my next visit and in the meantime I will keep my promise and send him a laptop.



We say good-bye and head back to the city. This poor kid, what did he do to serve this?. Where can I get him a laptop before tomorrow? I drive into Gaza city, it is now about 10 p.m and some shops are still open here. I need to buy memory sticks for all of my work here and also to copy my photos before travelling back through Tel Aviv. We go to a shop selling some laptops. They are relatively cheap, but not good quality and no guarantees. I ask where they came from, silly question, the tunnels! I decide to leave it and have a look in the Arab quarter of Jerusalem on my way out and leave it with one of Sr Susan's team to bring on their next visit. Abd deserves the best.

We stop off to visit Ouni's new baby. I have some gifts for her. We also meet the rest of the family and her older sister is very excited about the UNRWA summer games. She shows me her cap, new shoes and sweatshirt. Very colourful! The family evacuated this building as it came under heavy attack during the war. We didn't stop to take anything, we left in 5 minutes, just ourselves and a little food and water. In matters of life and death decisions, belongings are not important. Ouni gives thanks to God many times that his family are safe.



Ouni with his 8 day old daughter Heloi



Ahmed and Ayia



Ayia shows me her Summer Games gear

Ouni knows everyone in Gaza. I would like to meet the fishermen before I leave and ask if he can arrange it. We makes a few phone-calls and all is arranged. We will have to be at the port at 6 a.m. as that is when they come in, he explains.

I get back to the hotel, it is 11.30 p.m, a long day. The border closes at 2 p.m. in the morning so I will need to leave by 12.30 p.m. I pack my things and also organise the remaining toys and sweets, I will bring these to the nuns in the parish tomorrow.

Ouni 'phones to say there is a change of plan. The fishermen will meet me at 7.45 a.m. as they will be around for a few hours in the morning. Great, 2 more hours kip, I am very tired.

Abd is still on my mind. How difficult this war must have been for him after all he has been through already. What must have been going through his mind during Operation Cast Lead? I think of the Israeli soldier who shot him and chose to aim at his spine. He clearly knew he was about to destroy the life of this teenager. What was going through his mind when he was deciding to do this? Did he hesitate at all before squeezing the trigger? How did he feel after making his kill? Who taught him that it was OK to try to assassinate children? Terrible, I would like to meet this faceless butcher.

I review my things still to do list and pleased that we have covered so much ground today. Still, I could do with another week here at least.

I open volume 3 of Direction for Our Times, God the Father speaks to his children at the following words: “ *All children of the earth hear My call. Your God communicates with you in all majesty. I will do anything to save a soul and I have great power. The only thing I cannot overturn is your free will. If a soul chooses darkness over me there is nothing I can do for your free will is my gift to you and the Father will never take back a gift once given. It would be alien to the very nature of God. But you will return to Me. Return now in your heart...You have sampled the world's offerings and you have been left unloved and in darkness. I offer you all that is light and good. I offer you safety and confidence. I will nourish you in times of hunger and console you in sadness. You need nothing, only me. So there is no reason to languish. Your God has called you by name. Come to Me*”.

I pray to Him, as I pray every day, to end this cruel siege and bring justice to these people.

If you are in a position to help any of the families we met during our time in Gaza, please contact us at info@tuesdayschild.co.uk or [donate online](#)

[Continues to Day 14 »](#)

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Tuesday's Child Blog

Tuesday's Child Returns to Gaza – Day 14

Sunday 19th July 2009

Last day!

It is 7.45 a.m. and we drive to the fishing port to meet some of the fishermen. We have to get papers to enter the port and after a short wait these are approved. We drive past the pier and along the water's edge past endless small fishing boats, badly in need of maintenance. Several men come out of cottages and watch us with cautious eyes as we drive along. There are boats and boats here, all faded and chipped. No fishing trawlers in Gaza. However, it must have been very pretty in its day. A far cry though from the many thriving ports and marinas along the Mediterranean. Today's catch has already left as the men come in at 6 a.m.

Almost at the end of the getty we stop where a group of men are gathered outside a small out-house mending their nets. They welcome us and offer me a spot among the nets and a cup of tea. Ouni passes around his cigarettes among them and we sit and talk. I open my large black moleskin notebook and make notes, just a few clean pages left. It is full with notes of many stories and testimonials from this trip. Hundreds more still untold!

The two fishermen who do most of the talking are Raafat and Yaehu. I ask if they were always fishermen. *"I am a fisherman, my father was a fisherman and my grandfather was a fisherman"*, Raafat explains. *"When I was a little boy and out on the boat with my grandfather, learning to fish, he told me, the family were always fishermen, for years back"*. Raafat is mending his nets and I notice he has part of a net curled around his toe as he works and he pulls the net through the space between his big toe and second toe. I ask Yaehu how he fared last night. *"We work together, we caught hardly anything, less than 5 kilos of fish. They were shooting again last night, so we did not venture out any further"*. *"Yes, I heard the shooting last night"*, I say.





Rafaat, a Gazan fisherman

“It is impossible to make a living here. We are only allowed to fish within 3 miles of the shore. The first mile we don’t fish because the water here is filthy with sewage. Between 1 miles and 3 miles there are only some fish, but not enough. We need to go out beyond 6 miles to get nice fish and better catches. This is where we always fished. But since the blockade, we are shot at. Still, we have to feed our families so we take a chance”. I ask if anyone has been injured or killed. He gives me a long look, “ten dead this year”, he says, “all of them my good friends , and many others injured”.



Yaehu, Gazan fisherman who works with Raafat

I ask them how many children they have. Raafat has 7 children and Yaehu has 23 children. *“We need to be able to fish to feed our families. The fish we catch is not even enough to buy milk and pampers”*, Yaehu says. *“Well, definitely not in your house,”* I suggest to Yaehu and all the men laugh. We are joined by Mamoud and his son Ahmed. I ask Ahmed if he likes fishing and yes, he loves to go out with his father on the boat and wants to be a fisherman like his father. Dangerous, surely, for a child.



Mohammed and Ibrahim, Gazan fishermen



I ask Rafaat how many fishermen there are in Gaza. *“Now there are 300 fishermen”,* he says, *“there used to be many more, but there is no industry here now and it is dangerous”.* I ask what I can do to help *“there is nothing you can do, we need to be able to fish after 6 miles, these people don’t want us to live, they want to break us, they take pleasure in persecuting even fishermen”.*

“What harm are we to them, fishing for our livelihoods”, adds Yaehu, *“ we have no political interest, we are not Hamas or Fatah. We just want to be able to fish and make a living”.*

I like these men, they are warm and friendly and very patient with my many questions about life as a fisherman in Gaza. The scene is almost biblical and I think of Christ in Galilee with his beloved fishermen. I wonder what they smoked back then? Time to say good-bye to Peter and Paul and James and Andrew! Just as the thought hits, me, I realise that Raafat and Yaehu are brothers!

The chat here is good and I could sit here all day with these men and talk to them about life in Gaza. If I had more days left I would like to go out fishing with them and see what life is like out on the water. I think back to when I was wee and going fishing with my father in Donegal and Galway for herring and mackerel. He would bring them home and clean them and fillet them and Mum would cook them for dinner. My Dad loved fishing and he loved fish, especially when he was in Donegal. I guess that was the only time he had to fish, on holiday. The freezer at home was always full of whole salmon. He would invariably bring that home from Murlough, outside Ballycastle.

However, here in Gaza, fishing is not for sport and pleasure, it is a livelihood for many and tragically the only sport here is shooting at men trying to make one.

I promise to help raise the plight of these men on my return and look at ways in which we can help their families. We say our good-byes and I wish them well. I pray that their daily catch will improve.

We drive out of the port into the morning sun. It is a far cry from Killybegs!

I return and pack my things and all of the hotel staff bid me a kind farewell. We drive across town and I join mass at the Holy Family. It is good to be here and just sit in His presence. I pray again for His intercession and I offer this mass for an end to the blockade here and freedom and justice for these people who are suffering too much.

I recognise the communion hymn, my father's favourite. It is strange to hear Nearer My God to Thee in Arabic. It was the final hymn at my father's requiem as they carried him from the church. I think now of all the dead of Gaza, all the coffins carried here, the many young lives taken from families in the most violent of ways. The many infants who were only starting their journey here. The many bodies buried as many parts and the as yet unfound bodies buried under the rubble. Also, even the lack of dignity here in the burials for there was not enough concrete even here to bury their dead and old family graves had to be opened and bodies buried with another corpse. I think of all the children who died, and lost their right to life and as the hymn continues, the tears flow and I sob hard. My body is racked with crying. I guess it had to happen sooner or later. Still it is good to be able to cry. After my first visit, I was in shock. After mass, I give thanks to Our Lady for making this visit possible. I am very lucky to have been in Gaza for 14 days at a time when many NGOs find it impossible to get through. I heard earlier in the week that George Galloway, the UK politician was here, but only allowed to stay for 3 hrs.

Outside, I meet the sisters, the Missionary Sisters of Charity and the Sisters of the Child Jesus and I divide the rest of the toys between the two of them. I am sure both will know plenty of children to give them to. Unfortunately, I didn't get time to visit the Christian refugee camp on this visit. Next time. As for the huge bag of sweets, I pass these around the congregation outside the church and they are very welcome, not just by the children. I talk with some of the people. The lady from last week who gave me her letter approaches me asking if I have been able to help. I tell her again I cannot help her directly, I wish I could, but I have referred her letter on and maybe they can help her.

Ahmed and Sabah arrive to pick me up. Time to go! We stop off at Sabah's house and say good-bye. I will miss these lovely people. Nazem breaks with Palestinian custom and embraces me and gives me a kiss on each cheek, quite a compliment indeed! "*You are family now*", he explains warmly.

We drive to Erez. Sabah, Ahmed, me and Mohammed. The mood in the car is subdued, very different to the day I arrived and I am breaking my heart leaving. We stop first at the Hamas checkpoint and then I am given clearance. I say good-bye to everyone and hug Sabah and tell her to keep safe and I hope to see her again soon. I also forget custom and kiss her son Mohammed on both cheeks, then realising. "*It is OK*", Sabah says, "*Mohammed is like your son too now*". And then to Ahmed, who has looked after me so well these last 2 weeks. It is an emotional farewell. God please keep these precious people safe, I pray.

I walk the quarter mile to the Erez crossing, the Palestinian steel wall all around, screaming injustice. The huge mass of Erez steel that imprisons these people approaches and I am outraged. My blood is boiling as I walk back into

a land that has no decency and is a shame to the state of Israel and to Jews around the world. The Palestinian man helping with my luggage, talks away, but I am lost in thought. He tells me he has 23 children. I must give him a good tip! I turn and wave to Sabah a few times, they are still there watching me go. As I get to the gate I turn and give a final wave. I hope to return again soon. For now, I can be of more help to them at home, raising money to give more food to the people we are feeding and to try to help many more in great need. As I walk, I am acutely aware of the too many cameras and the trickle of perspiration running down my back; the heat is fierce. My phone bleeps twice, a farewell message and my cousin Fr Michael who is at Clones watching the Antrim game. I am glad of the distraction and ask him to keep me posted on the score.



Leaving Gaza



Palestinian wall surrounding the northern border



The Erez border terrain

An ambulance passes me, a patient being transferred for treatment. I notice it is an elderly woman and apart from the driver she is alone. I think it is terrible that the sick must travel like this unaccompanied.

As I wait for the first of the internal gates to open I am joined by another girl travelling alone. We start to chat. Her name is Barbara, she is a journalist with French TV. It is nice to have some company through Erez. She says she has been in Gaza for 3 days and has been sick the whole time – vomiting and diarrhoea. She has caught whatever I had then also. I ask if she is going back to Jerusalem and as I have no lift, if she would like to share a taxi. She already has one booked for 3 p.m and offers me a lift. Nice to have some company on the road back.

It takes about an hour to get through Erez. There is only Barbara, myself and one other guy, as it is about to close for the day, but it takes awhile. As per last year, we also have to go through the X-ray tube and again I wonder is this where they are going to nuke me? I resent these unnecessary full body X-rays. All above, a whole line of armed soldiers looking down. Anyone of these could zap me now I think, good to have a journalist with me! Finally, I am through the last gate and passport control. The soldier here is not friendly, she asks if I will be coming back within the 3 months of my visa. I tell her that I hope so. She says “*I don't think so*” and smiles. Strange sense of humour! Where did they do their military training. In Gehenna?

Outside, I meet a group of clowns from “clowns without borders”. They have clearance for the UNRWA summer games but they are not permitted entry. I explain that the transit is closing at 3.30 p.m. today and they don't have much time, just 20 minutes or so and to try again. They are refused entry.

We stop 10 minutes from the border where I stopped last year, for some water and a little food. There is wireless here so I check my emails and also send an email to one of the field officers in UNRWA to let them know the clowns en route to the summer games are stuck at the Erez gate. Even though we are just 10 minutes from the border, the sheer range of the menu and amount of food here rocks me. Everything is so clean, relaxed, normal, yet bizarrely abnormal and free.

I am keen to visit Eshkalon and Sdoret, two of the Israeli towns that were hit by Hamas rockets. The taxi driver Amin says he will take me to Eshkalon. We drive through, it is only 10 minutes from Gaza and we are in a different world. Nice houses, expensive cars, green suburbs, shopping malls. There is

no sign of any destruction here. No sign of any hunger. No sign of any persecution. We stop a few people and ask them if they can direct us to the damage from the Hamas rockets, neither are able to, neither know anything about it. Then a man points to a building hit by a rocket where one member of staff was killed. That apart, it appears very relaxed and like any other town anywhere, contrasting starkly from the concentration camp just along the coast.



Eshkalon, a different world just 10 minutes away



Playground in Eshkalon

We drive on to Jerusalem. I talk with Barbara about her work and I tell her of mine. I show her some photos and also ask Amin about where I could go to buy a laptop (for Abd). I also ask about Ramallah and if it is possible to visit there and find out what is happening to the children there. We make an arrangement to go later and Barbara decides to come to. Once in Jerusalem, I get more money changed into shekels and then check in at my hotel. I am staying at the same place as before. I shower and change. The hot water and cleanliness of this room is so welcome after the squalor of Gaza. I stand under the shower for ages and let the hot water soothe my aching muscles. Outside, Amin is waiting for me, we pick up Barbara at Jaffa gate and drive to Ramallah.

We drive through East Jerusalem and reach Ramallah about 8 p.m. Again, the difference between the Palestinian and Israeli areas is stark. Ramallah is very busy. We stop to pick up Ibrahim, a friend of Amin's, a Palestinian and former child prisoner. I warm to Ibrahim. He tells his story. He was imprisoned 3 times, the first time when he was 16 yrs old, for 12 months, the second time when he was 19 yrs old and again when he was 21 yrs old. He now works in promoting human rights for Palestinian children. No young person should have to experience such abuses. It has clearly shaped him into the person he is for he now works in human rights. It's strange driving around Ramallah with 3 people I did not know, even 4 hrs ago. They are a vibrant bunch and the craic is good and I am glad of the company. It's not good to be alone after Gaza.



Ramallah, West Bank

We stop for some ice cream and more water. I must've drunk about 2L of water since leaving Gaza and I am still thirsty, such is my dehydration. The computer shops are closed but a friend of Ibrahim's works in a wholesale computer firm. Barbara is going back into Gaza in 2 weeks time and she kindly offers to bring the laptop to Abd for me. Perfect. We go to the wholesale unit and they kindly open up. After some deliberation, I choose a Hewlart Packard laptop for Abd. It's cool. I wouldn't mind this one myself. They load it with all the usual packages and software and it comes with a 3 yr guarantee. I opt for the standard laptop bag rather than the trendier rucksack look, it would be inappropriate to give a rucksack to a paralysed teenage. We dump the box and packing, for when Barbara carries it in, it will have to as if it is her own.

We stop in the Palestinian parliament in Ramallah. Ibrahim works here in the human rights department and he shows me around. It is an impressive building. This parliament ofcourse is Fatah not Hamas. We go into one of the large conference rooms, it is huge. On either side of the wall, pictures of Arafat and the current guy. I sit at the top in the speaker's chair. Unfortunately, my camera charge has gone so only Ibrahim's mobile phone. He takes a few pictures for me to send my friends in Gaza.



The Palestinian Parliament, Ramallah



The Palestinian Parliament, tired but still waiting....

We get back to the hotel at about 11 a.m. Amin will collect me later at 2.30 a.m. to take me to the airport. I want to be there early as, while my flight is not until 6.30 a.m. I know, from my last time flying out of Tel Aviv that security will keep me ages and it will not be pleasant.

In retrospect, I wish I had taken a few more days in Jerusalem before going home. I would also like to have visited Bethlehem but will have to wait until my next trip. No time even for the beautiful garden of Gethsemane. At least I walked the Via Dolorosa and visited the Holy Sepulchre church the day I arrived.

It is late when we return to the hotel. I repack my luggage and make sure nothing inappropriate that may draw the wrath of the Israeli security is in it. I secure the flash sticks with duplicate copies of all my photographs in different areas of my luggage and the original discs inside notes in my purse. With all of the embroidery from the microfinance project, my luggage will be overweight and I used most of my remaining shekels for the laptop for Abd. Still, I have my card and there is a cash point at the airport.

Day 15 Monday

I try and get a little sleep, but the images of Gaza flash though my mind. One by one, I see the faces of the children I have met these last two weeks as if on a continuous rolling film. An hour later, my lift to the airport is here. Barbara, is here too, asleep on the back seat, exhausted after her short trip in. Her husband is flying in from Prague tonight around the same time as my check-in. We drive quickly through Jerusalem and out towards Tel Aviv. The hotels, motorways and top of the range cars, a far cry from the sheer deprivation and desolation that is Gaza. How can people be at peace living here, knowing the horror that is only a few hours drive away. It is nauseating.

Tel Aviv airport approaches and I feel apprehensive as to what lies ahead

after the unpleasantness of last year. Still a small price to pay and at least this time I am prepared for what to expect. The trick is, no matter how harassed and intimidated not to react.

It is as I expected and I am three hours with security. While I thought my luggage was in order, I overlooked checking an envelope left into the hotel by the director of the blind school. I assumed it was a cd of the school and their story. The cd was there, but also a hidden extra, a music cd, with Hamas gunmen depicted on the front of it and anti-Israeli slogans. I feel sick. How could I have missed this? Surely, he must have known giving me something like this would be a problem. Israeli security have a field day and the item is taken to clearly a more senior official. I explain it is not mine, but as soon as the words are out, they sound stupid. And so it starts, the cubicle search still to follow. The bit I detest. The female security guard allocated suggests that I smell her perfume. I consider it inappropriate given her closeness and the nature of the search. I decline. She also offers that some of things that children have to live with in countries such as the Congo are terrible, clearly intended to elicit a response. I say nothing. And on it goes.

The plane is due to take off in 45 minutes and I not checked in. I am 8 kg over and have to pay extra. I am escorted to excess baggage and have to wait 10 minutes, even though I am the only traveller queueing. I explain my plane is due to leave and I would be grateful for some attention. I am barked at to shut up. Temper, temper! When I am finally seen to, the excess baggage is calculated in shekels. I do not have enough and this most unpleasant of men will not accept payment in shekels and dollars only one or the other. I am referred to get all the one currency. It is suggested to me that it would be better at this stage to remove items from my luggage otherwise I will miss my plane. I am escorted to a bureau de change. I change the necessary money to shekels and return to excess baggage again. I pay the money and am told I am 60 shekels short. I show him the amount he gave me earlier, he said he must have made a mistake. I say nothing. I find another 100 shekel note, he refuses to accept it as the corner is torn. Minutes are ticking away, again I am told to remove some items from my luggage as I will miss my plane. I refuse to do so. I wonder what British Midland will say about this in London - probably nothing. He screams at me that he needs 60 shekels. I tell him I don't have it, and work out the correct excess baggage for him, confirming the 60 shekels is not needed. He takes a phone-call and after a further 5 minutes, he releases the excess baggage receipt. I return to the check in desk, they check me in. I am told by my "escort" to run as I may miss the plane. There are no boards near this area to check if the gate is closing.

Four and a half hours after my arrival in the airport I am finally in the departure lounge. When I get to the gate, the plane is 2 hrs delayed. I am exceptionally dehydrated and there are no cash points here. I find a 20 USD note in my bag and buy some water and fruit. I am frazzled by their treatment and their petty games.

It is a relief to finally be in my seat on the plane. Sleep won't come, yet I have now been awake for 24 hrs. I notice the many Jews on the plane and I am angered by their freedom to travel while others living in this land are imprisoned and collectively punished. In front of me, father and son, both wearing scull caps. I think of Khalil Shaheen and his dream to take his son to watch a football match. I sort out my things and make some final notes. I come across the school picture of Dima her mother gave me. Such a needless loss of life. The tragedy is that there are so many stories in Gaza like Dimas.



Dima, who died from her head injuries on 3rd March 2009

I think of all the children, the hunger, the sickness, the nightmares and the trauma of their little lives. I open *Direction for Our Times* and read *“Children, you look to the starving areas of the world and say, ‘But look, God did not take care of those children’. I would respond to you that I arranged for their care but my more affluent children did not share their gifts. So the failure is not mine but my children’s.”* And I read on...*Children, with all of the wisdom of heaven, you can now see the level of darkness that settled in every growing layers upon the world. Prophets from even one hundred years ago could not have imagined such evil. They could not fathom the depravity that would be accepted by men in the future. The enemies of heaven have persuaded humanity that much of this evil is good.....You must decide. Do you serve The Light? Or will you continue in darkness? You have been warned. You have been urged. Darkness holds nothing for you. Choose light now. All has been foretold... I burst through the darkness now in all glory... God’s kingdom comes”*. I pray He will burst through the darkness of Gaza and that nowhere in the world which such depravity be revisited on an imprisoned people, of whom over half are children.

Five hours later, we touch down in Heathrow. The normality of London is very welcome after the Tel Aviv experience. Duty free here seems vulgar now and the difference between the wealth here and the sheer hunger and inhumanity of Gaza stark. I bypass the sports car raffles walking on to the Belfast gate. I am still thirsty and it is only here I realise the toll the gastroenteritis has taken these last few weeks. Yet I can leave, I think of all the children struggling for survival in the hospitals and I weep as I walk.

As I sit at the gate I read *“I want to share my view with you. From heaven where I monitored the fall of every leaf, I saw a world that is unbalanced. Some of my children had every possible earthly possession. Because of the abundance of possessions, My children in some parts of the world began to think in a distorted way. They thought then that they were entitled to such riches. When they could not secure the riches they admired, they began to think they were deprived. They became unhappy, much as a child who has had too many treats will get sick and feel unwell and stop laughing and smiling. My children in the more affluent areas of the world experienced this occurrence and their unhappiness and dissatisfaction led to all manner of spiritual decay. My heavenly view shifts for a moment, and I gaze upon other areas of the world, where during this time, children lay dying of starvation and disease, simply for the want of basic necessities. These are the two extremes. They are equally disturbing to Me because I neither created one*

group to be gluttonous or the other to live and die in misery. Children, were you the father of this group of individuals, what would you do? You would like me to say, enough, we must restructure". Restructure indeed, starting in the Middle East please. Demolition of the wall of steel that incarcerates Palestine would be a good start.

Beal Feirste at last, it is good to be home. I am pleased to have got out with all my photographs and film cassettes. Some sleep today and then to the media, I decide. Surely the people of Northern Ireland will want to hear the truth of the plight of the people of Gaza. Surely the newspapers here will be keen to print the truth?

I answer my emails and send a few to my friends in Gaza. I send the one from Ramallah, joking that I am here in the Parliament waiting for the Palestinian factions to come to a joint meeting, to broker unity between the respective groups and that I have asked them to bring Shilat with them. Surely, it can't be that difficult? I look across at my framed family emblem, a white bird bearing an olive branch. Peace, it seems so simple, yet in God's beloved Middle East has never been further from achieving it. Blessed are the peacemakers! I pledge to continue to highlight the truth of what is happening in Gaza and expose the ongoing and indeed heightened injustices of daily life there and to continue to support as many children as possible with the most basic of necessities for human existence.

If you are in a position to help any of the families we met during our time in Gaza, please contact us at info@tuesdayschild.co.uk or [donate online](#)

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