

Scenario Firsthand witnessing the very first days of the war on Gaza

After the day 400 of the ongoing war in Gaza, and the trauma we've been experiencing ever since, I can have the strength now to know about what happened on that very first day of it. It was supposed to be a happy morning, where I should prepare my bag to go on a work trip to the West Bank with my last job. I was so excited, and I had many plans to do, being on that land for the first time in my life. However, there was another plan being executed where our lives have not been the same ever since. I woke up to the sound of unstoppable bombings and rockets around for hours, it did not seem like anything I have lived before in Gaza. Without thinking, I told my wife to prepare our emergency bag so she could head to her family's house immediately. I decided to stay at home trying to understand what was going on, but communication was impossible. During that time, I stayed in touch with my family in Beit Hanoun Northern Gaza Strip, but I could not get any hold of them. I felt so nervous and overwhelmed, unsure of what to do next. In that moment of panic, I made the decision to stay at our house and wait for my family to evacuate from Beit Hanoun and then decide on the next move. My wife kept calling me insisting to join her at her family's house before the night came, were things get escalated and situation gets more dangerous.

The light had dimmed, and all of a sudden, the dust and smoke filled the air, and the visibility around me was zero. The bombings seemed relentless, the sounds of destruction were beyond terrifying and people were screaming in the streets screaming everywhere. I had to decide, whether to stay or should I leave to my in laws' house. I could not stay any longer, I pulled myself together and finally decided to join my wife at her family's house, hoping to find some safety and comfort amidst this chaos. There was not any clue on safe spots though, but being surrounded by family was that source of safety.

We stayed for couple of days there, the shelling was intensing everyday, we were barely able to sleep or find any comfort during that time, we didn't have much hope for any ceasefire to happen, with all the news saying about expanding the war, and the ongoing deteriorating situation we were living.

One night at 2:00AM I was scrolling through the news over my phone, and I read a message was sent to INGO workers notifying and asking them to leave their house in Gaza city in head towards the south of Wadi Gaza, due to some information

they received from the Israeli side. I was confused, I made number of calls asking my friends and colleague about the truthfulness of such rumors, but everyone was panicking and waiting in the early morning hours to head south. I woke my wife and told her to get ready for another evacuation. Her family refused to leave their home and decided to stay hoping that this war would finish in another week or so, and since nowhere was safe, they claimed that their house would give them that metaphoric safety.

I received a call at dawn from my wife's cousin, who lives opposite our house that the last bombing was so near that they have casualties in their house, asking for ambulance. Later we learned that shelling was for our building, and some of our neighbors were killed. I told my wife this news in tears and asked her to be ready to go south, there is nothing left for us here, we lost our house.

I drove my wife and my family, whom I met halfway to the south to a friend's place in Deir al-balah. I cannot forget how pale and worried everyone was. My wife was not speaking and was in utter shock upon losing our house. The streets were filled with people carrying whatever they could carry and moving south, on cars, carts, crowded vehicles, and on feet.

I was not satisfied, and I felt that I needed to be exactly at the place where people have been asked to seek refuge at an UNRWA school in Khan Younis. I took my wife and we went there. The school was flooding with people, not only INGO worked and their families, but also normal people who overheard the same piece of information. We stayed on the kerbside, as the classrooms had already been filled, and there's no where to go. I felt some sense of safety somehow, but the sounds of shelling were hearable. In a couple of hours the school was overfilled with double of the people were in it when we arrived. The night had approached, and we did not have any mattresses or anywhere in the school to sleep on, so we decide we're sleeping in the car. It was amongst the awful sleeps I've ever had; I remember walking up in the middle of the night on screaming of some displaced people fighting over a space in one of the classrooms. When the morning came, my wife could not handle such a situation and advised we join my family at the friend's house, whatever happens to them happen to us, so we did.

What does "displaced person in UNRWA school" mean?

- A displaced person in a school, meaning there is no mattress, no blankets, and no pillow. One's mattress is the floor, the shirt he is wearing is his blanket, and his pillow being the only bag of clothes he had left the house in, which means back and leg pain from this sleeping position, stomach ache and throat ache from the cold, and headache from anxiety.

- A displaced person in a school means there is no water at all. He does not wash his hands, does not wash his clothes, and does not even use the toilet.

- A displaced person in a school means there is no clean water to drink, even if he dies of thirst. Can he die of thirst? Yes it's possible!

- A displaced person in a school means that when he wants to use the water cycle, and he will wait in a line of 100-200 people until his turn comes, and as soon as his turn comes, there will be another 100 people knocking on the door for him to finish quickly, and of course there is no water in the bathroom.

- A displaced person in the school means there is no cooking, no bread, no food, no drink, except for a few boxes of feta cheese, the smell of which is almost coming out from the heat. He goes to the bakery to get bread for his family, which is no less than 15 people. A queue of 200-400 people stands before him, and when his turn comes, they give only one pack to him. One bundle is not enough for one meal unless he was not targeted and bombed while he is standing waiting.

- A displaced person in a school means that he looks up to the sky thirty times every minute, and he imagines that the new massacre will take place in his school, and the new breaking news will be about him and his family.

- For a displaced person in a school, this means a distant, unattainable dream: taking a shower. Bathing is an impossible luxury for him.

- A displaced person in a school means that the bread loaf is divided into two, or into four, and what is in it is not enough for it. The important thing is that, something entered his stomach, and this is a great achievement.

