

UNITED NATIONS SEMINAR ON ASSISTANCE TO THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

Speeding up relief, recovery and reconstruction in post-war Gaza

United Nations Office at Vienna, 31 March and 1 April 2015

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

PLENARY I Immediate and longer-term humanitarian needs in the Gaza Strip

Paper presented by

Ms. Eva Pilipp
Special Coordinator for Palestine
Society for Austro-Arab Relations
Vienna

Special needs of children and young adults/giving voice to young people

I have just last night returned from a two weeks visit to the Gaza Strip, which I have visited around seven times in the last two years. During Operation Protective Edge, I spent nine days in Gaza City. I want to focus the time I have to speak today on the topic of children and young people in the Gaza Strip – which make around 60 percent of the total population of more than 1, 7 Million. During operation protective edge – according to UN figures - 495 children were killed, many more wounded. There is not a single child in the Gaza Strip whose life did not – in one way or another – change because of the last war. Trauma, PTSD, increased aggression, fears and all other symptoms come along naturally with war. An eight year old Gazan child witnessed three wars within the last years. I think literally every child or young adult or adult I interviewed said the last war was the worst – due to its length and the absence of any red lines, meaning everything and everyone was a target – also children.

I want to stress in this panel that there is not just technical needs of reconstruction, like houses, schools, electricity, water supply lines and so on. Certainly they are basic and of outmost urgency, but we should not forget that there are also the many destroyed minds and traumas the war created especially in children and young adults. The war never ended, the trauma in Gaza is continuous since 1948, people say. Who physically survived the last war, now struggles with severe trauma or depression, a mental war: Literally every person in the Gaza Strip is in need of a therapy, yet there is so little opportunity to get treatment. The reasons vary: Social stigma, lack of money, lack of information, lack of service, lack of access in general – and often simply lack of time. People are busy to survive on a daily base to deal with various factors of oppression and poverty, absence of electricity and unemployment; they do not permit themselves the time to seek treatment for their traumas. According to psychologists I talked to in Gaza domestic violence is on the raise once again after the war – often following a chain of command from husband to wife and wife to children in order to feel power over others. Children are increasingly witnessed showing extreme aggressive behaviour towards other children – often a reaction of what they witness at home and during the war. By reproducing aggression they identify with the aggressor – whether the father or a war plane and thus feel a little safer. Then there is also the so often neglected issue of cultural, artistic, political and civil rights – which are heavily oppressed in the Gaza Strip due to those in power in Gaza. They contribute to trauma, fear and powerlessness that the Israeli Blockade and war produced. The last Palestinian elections took place almost ten years ago and caused a severe change of life in the Gaza Strip. People feel disempowered and humiliated in the absence of any renewed voting right.

The median age in Gaza is 18, compared with a world average of 28. In most European countries it's about 40, and it is 30 years in Israel. Only in a dozen African countries is the median age lower, reaching 15 in Uganda for example: Giving the amount of young people in the Gazan population it is more than important to understand their narratives in order to empower them and create future scenarios for their generation.

I want to share with you **four different stories** from the Gaza Strip which I collected from young people – as we know children and young adults often speak frankly, they are not yet afraid of the system, of politicians, of political correctness. So it is their voices that we should focus on too and take them serious in any discourse on reconstruction in post-war Gaza:

First Story

The first one from Gaza City is the story of Rula, a 13 years old girl – she told me her story during the war last August: Gaza City on the 29th of July shortly before midnight: All of a sudden everything turns black – but this time not because of an electricity shortage. A bomb hit the neighbour's house, obviously cutting through the power grid too, two windows in Rulas house break. Her brother Hani starts crying – he had returned to wetting his pants during the war – a behaviour common in many children in Gaza after being exposed to extreme fear and pressure. 'There is no safe place for us civilians, Rula tells me. The bombs don't kill us only during the day time, but also when I dream or draw. Basically I am dying all the time. Three days after the bomb hit the neighbour's house, Rula had changed her face colour to yellow. Another symptom frequent after shock trauma. War with its smells and sounds – particularly the constant sound of F16 warplanes - changes everything. Nothing stays as it was. I feel there is no one who can protect us, if the UN cannot protect us, who can? Rula asks. My friend's school had been transformed to a military base, another school turned into blood. How shall I go back to school and relax or smile again? I need my daily routine back, I want safety!

So of course there are many more things that Rula said, I tried to reproduce a short passage. Then again, Rula is still able to think clearly and articulate herself, many children simply cannot do that anymore because they died or are heavily traumatized. Even their right to tell their own story has been denied.

Second Story

The second story talks about the city of destroyed dreams: Samer, a young film maker, tells me: We are young, we want to go out, have fun, do things like people in any other country do too. When I told Samer I was going to speak at this conference in Vienna – he asked me why he could not be there too and speak directly for himself without representatives. He then said: It is important to understand that the situation before the war both economically and politically was extremely bad. But after the war, it is zero, there seems to be no hope left. I want people in the world to know that the Israeli war, the occupation, the siege are not the only pattern of repression and violence we face on a daily base. Since the Hamas takeover to power in 2007, life completely changed in Gaza from within. Starting with the gruesome scene of pulling the bodies of dead Fatah fighters through the streets of Gaza, a repressive political system took over which aims to transform the Gazan society as a whole. It is not important how long Hamas will stay in power now, Samer says, the problem is with the damage in the minds of young people they have already created. There was a deep change towards religious conservatism in the last years in combination with a complete denial of freedom of speech and other political rights like the right to demonstrate against those holding on to power. When in 2011 a group of people built an anti-Hamas protest tent in a square in Gaza City, the police brutally burned it down and killed nine people. We

want the world to know this too. We live in a big prison because of the Israeli siege, but the prison guards from within kill us every day.

‘Our cinemas have been burned by Hamas related extremists; there is not a single cinema left. Artistic activities are severely challenged and restricted by Hamas rigid interpretation of religious laws. And this in Gaza – where one of the first cinemas of the Middle East stood and which port used to export strawberries, flowers and olive oil to the rest of the world! This place was called Palestine. Now, if my younger sister for example puts on make-up to school or rejects the compulsory prayers – she gets told off from her teacher. This is not a place where children and young adults can develop creative or critical minds or deal with any war traumas. People are afraid to talk, to criticise Hamas – and then there is this other fear if you criticise Hamas, you are seen as not being patriotic for Palestine as if you don’t support the Palestinians people plight for freedom of occupation, the situation is quite schizophrenic for us, and not many people talk about it. The ones who have not lost their mind because of war, lose it because of the rulers within the Gaza Strip.

Third Story

The third story is about Basma from Jabalia refugee camp. I met her last week at the camp’s youth center during her weekly poetry class. Basma is 12 years old; poetry is her hobby and dream for the future. When I entered the center she was performing in front of other children. This is the story she wanted to share with me: ‘So many schools have been destroyed during the war, and after the war I started to be sad more often than before the war. I am sad also because our country is not as developed as for example South Korea, where everything is modern and has the newest technology. When I am grown up I will study and live in England not in the Gaza Strip. I think it is enough that I live here now. Do you have wars in Austria too?, she asks me. I said we had the last one like more than sixty years ago. Basma continues: ‘We Palestinians have seen many wars; maybe we are the most people in the world who saw war. When I write a poem I write about the war a lot, it gives me ideas for my poems. Still I prefer there were no wars at all, even though war is good for poetry sometimes. War does not make a difference between children and flowers, between sheep and men, between people and houses. It destroys all of us. In my last poem I wrote about cars on the street that reminds me of the war rockets, of stars that scare us, of lives that end. Stars could be an explosion, how do we know? When I grow up I will be a poet and live in England, I do not want to live in Gaza anymore.

The youth center of Jabalia – one of four in the whole Gaza Strip - is one of the very few places where boys and girls can meet together, learn traditional Palestinian Dabke dance, poetry, drama and singing amongst many other things without strict gender separation. The Jabalia youth center, I felt was a very hope giving safe place where children can breathe and be relieved for some hours from all kinds of fears and pressures. The center promotes art as a comprehensive concept that helps to achieve social justice in order to promote a progressive democratic society empowering the voice of children and young adults.

Fourth Story

Journalist Tamer tells me the following: ‘ In Gaza we have an enemy from within and without, an enemy from inside and outside, there is so much fear around that

at some point you stop do be afraid at all. You just don't care. During the war I was sitting on the roof of my house, taking photos, I knew at any time a bomb could destroy the house, kill me and the family. I did not feel afraid, I just stopped to care. At times it does not seem to make a difference whether you are alive or not. At other times, when my mood lightens, I love life and I am craving to have the rights that other people enjoy around the world, but that we Palestinians from Gaza are denied. The occupation is horrible, yet not the only oppressor around. Many people in Gaza are desperately waiting for a change of government in the Gaza Strip. And if we think of children? We should remember that children and young adults have cultural rights too– they have the right to play in safety, to have access to art and cultural activities, to education free from religious dogma and suppression and of course to psycho-social counselling when needed. Gaza City, with a population of around 750,000, is undoubtedly a densely populated urban area, it was easy for Israel to kill hundreds of civilians, but people here ask also why they do not get any support by their government. The leaders had disappeared during the war, being safely in their tunnels under the city of Gaza where no bombs could reach them, and the International community, the UN Security Council had failed miserably on the Palestinians. Palestinians do not only suffer the Israeli occupation, but their own government or governments, but that of course most people are afraid to say.

An art project I would like to do is to build a cemetery on which instead of white gravestones, small olive trees grow, and in each tree trunk the name of the dead person will be engraved. Every time I try to translate my fears and anger into art – I realize there is a problem – either the tools I need cannot enter Gaza because of the siege, or the art I want to do is considered not suitable for Hamas or the conservative majority of our society. After the war, me like many of my colleagues have given up hope on Gaza and dream to immigrate to a more relaxed life in freedom from all sorts of oppression. There is this narrative, this poetry of destruction that surrounds us, but we are limited here, the narrow spaces we create for our freedoms are immediately occupied again. I do honestly not see a future for me in the Gaza Strip under the current political and economic situation. I definitely do not want my children to grow up here. I want to live my life, leave traces when I die, but Gaza is not the place to fulfil this dream.'

So, these were some of the many thoughtful things Tamer told me, a journalist I have known for many years by now. He like many others which might have good jobs and reasonable amounts of money suffer that the constant disempowerment and marginalisation have left few opportunities for expression of identity, individualism or artistic desires.

I hope I was able to communicate some of the voices from within the Gaza Strip and I am happy to answer any sort of question. Thank you.
