

ICWA LETTERS

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A Spoiled Gaza Holiday

BY HISHAM H. AHMED

JERUSALEM, Israel

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Visiting the Gaza Strip these days has become quite a learning experience. Visitors tend to come away with one of two impressions. There are those who, having encountered the new mood prevalent among Gazans, view the changes taking place in a positive way. They see that people now have the opportunity to move about more freely than they could under the occupation and are able to start reconstructing their lives. The most obvious manifestation of this has been the massive building projects currently underway. On the other hand, there are others who see the complexity of the situation: The Palestinian National Authority (PNA) has undertaken to remedy a situation that after a little over a year still shows rampant poverty and sky-high unemployment rates.

Most visitors to the Strip, whether they come back with a positive or a negative impression, seem to have a uniform view of the bureaucratic difficulties involved in moving in and out of the area. The following interview was conducted with a Palestinian woman (anonymous at her request). She narrates the difficulties she and her husband encountered when they visited the Strip during the Eid Holiday in May 1995.¹

My husband and I decided, with the encouragement of many of his friends, to spend the Eid Al-Adha Holiday with his family and relatives in the Gaza Strip. They said that it would be easy to get a permit to return to the West Bank and that our marriage certificate, which shows that I have a West Bank ID, would make it possible for us to leave the Strip without any problems.

Trusting in what we heard, we traveled to Gaza two days before the Eid. The car we took went straight to Gaza where it was stopped at the Israeli Erez checkpoint as you enter the Strip. Israeli soldiers ordered all passengers to get out of the car and to walk through a pen which resembles a cage. We were searched and had our ID cards inspected. When my husband's turn came, they asked for his travel permit to enter the Strip. He showed them his Gaza ID but they ignored it and went on with their routine questions. They inquired about his point of departure, his destination and the purpose of his trip. Then it was my turn. I do not have a Gaza ID.

The ID I carry was issued in the West Bank where I was born. Moreover, I didn't have a permit allowing me in the Strip. With our marriage certificate in hand, we explained to the soldiers that we were just briefly visiting with family for the holiday.

After about ten minutes of arguing, they let us in. We walked towards Gaza. We went through another checkpoint, manned by Palestinian police. We faced some questioning there as well. However, overall, the crossing was uneventful.

We went to my in-laws' house in Al-Rimal quarter. As we got there,

1. Eid is the feast celebrated by Moslems on the occasion of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his son.

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life in Gaza looked normal to us. We spent the first two days visiting the city, the sea and the central market, the Souq. When I went to these different places, I thought that the holiday, which was planned to last for 4-5 days, would be enjoyable. Therefore, I decided to take advantage of every minute we had, visiting as many places as possible and talking to as many people as I could.

We spent the first two days of the Eid with the family. On the third day, we decided to visit some friends and relatives in some of the refugee camps around Gaza — Braij, Nsairat and Jabalia. It is there that we began to encounter a series of unpleasant surprises.

We flagged down a taxi to take us to Al-Braij refugee camp. The driver looked at us with astonishment in his eyes: "The situation in the camps is different from that in Gaza City," he warned my husband. "The atmosphere is still quite conservative there. People take certain things quite seriously." He concluded: "Your wife needs to wear something on her head in order to cover her hair."

We had no choice but to return to the Souq where we bought a scarf, the *Isharp*. I covered my hair in preparation for the trip to the camps. There, I really felt shocked. The overall sanitary, housing and economic conditions are appalling. The roads are very narrow and open sewage flows throughout the camp, emitting an intolerable odor. The place is infested with insects and flies.

In spite of such conditions, children play in the streets. They don't seem to realize how dangerous such an environment is.

Not only the narrow roads and alleys are crowded, but so are houses. On average, families have ten members sharing two rooms in less than 60-square-meter houses. In most cases, the parents, children and grandchildren live in the same house. Even more stress is added by the fact that any given house is occupied by all members of the family most of the time. Unemployment rates in the area are at record levels. Therefore, people tend to spend most of their time at home. The lack of things for people to do or places to go creates boredom and prolonged frustration. This results in despair and anguish. Furthermore, due to the lack of progress in the peace talks and/or in the standard of living, criticisms and complaints are frequently leveled at the PNA. The people I saw and spoke with were angry and resentful.

Autonomy seems only to have worsened their situation.

We stayed in the camps all day long. At dark, we witnessed another shocking phenomenon: Huge rats started roaming the narrow alleys. Bored young men use their guns to shoot the rats. This form of entertainment leaves many big rats lying dead in the open sewage. Nobody seems to pay attention to the fact that this contaminates the environment and is bound to cause many horrible diseases.

Another noteworthy feature of life in the camps is how frequently people discuss arms trade. I am not exaggerating when I say that the main topic of discussion among people in every house we visited was weapons — the types available and their prices. Anyone can obtain a weapon at any time by merely producing the required amount of money. Weapons are abundantly available.

By talking to people, I learned more about life in Gaza these days. To my surprise, I heard stories of several cases of rape and attempted rape. In such a conservative environment, developments of this kind have a particular significance, especially because the known rapes were reported to have been committed by some members of the Palestinian police who came from outside Palestine.

What I heard and saw made the place feel suffocating to me. I became quite anxious and wanted to leave immediately. Despite causing my husband embarrassment in front of people he knows, I asked him to take us back to Gaza city where life was somewhat more civilized.

There is a tremendous gap in the standard of living, among people in the Strip. A few have everything they need: They live a life of luxury. In fact, some residents of Gaza City are wealthy beyond imagination. The majority, on the other hand, must struggle each day for a living which they

do not always attain. The people who live in the camps are the most destitute and poverty-stricken.

When the holiday was over, my husband turned to the arduous task of obtaining a permit so that we could leave Gaza and return to the West Bank. Once again, we encountered one shock after another. Initially, I thought that our departure out of Gaza would be no more difficult than our entry. I did not think that returning to our home in Jerusalem was an unreasonable objective. To my dismay, returning to Jerusalem gradually began to feel



like a fantasy. After a long sweaty day of trying, my husband informed me that obtaining a permit was a most complicated matter. He emphasized that it was going to take some time, because the bureaucratic procedures involved were difficult and discouraging. First, one submits a request for a permit to the liaison committee of the Palestinian authority. This committee forwards the application with an attached report about the applicant's political life to the Israeli authorities. The Israelis review applications and decide who should be granted or denied a permit. They, in turn, forward their decision to the Palestinian Authority which then must distribute permits or denials. Needless to say, permits are denied in most cases.

Confronted with these obstacles, I realized that I was trapped in Gaza against my will. I began to feel like a stranger. Everything was different for me. The social customs and traditions in Gaza are different from what I am used to in Jerusalem. The types of issues that preoccupy most people there are consistent with Gaza's life style. To be forced to be there against my will made me feel uneasy, angry and even rebellious.

Nine days went by without any positive results. No permits were obtained. By sheer coincidence, we were talking with some people who had a brilliant idea about how to obtain a permit:

"You need to have a *Wasta* (a middleman). Then everything becomes easy," one of them said.

From that moment, it took us five more days to find the right person, whom we basically bribed to help us get the permit. We had no choice but to participate in this corrupt system in order to get out of Gaza.

On the sixteenth day of our stay in Gaza, my husband's exertions to bribe *Wastas* paid off: He got the permit. We decided to leave the same day for Jerusalem. We had to go through Erez checkpoint again. When our turn came for inspection, my husband showed them his permit — the only permit we had. When my turn came, I showed them my West Bank ID and told them that I did not need a permit. However, the soldiers insisted that I did. For a moment, I thought that getting out of Gaza was impossible and that my ordeal would last for ever. The checkpoint was the only source of hope left for us and I simply didn't want to go back. We argued with them for over 15 minutes and showed them the marriage certificate. They seemed adamant, but finally they agreed to let us leave.

We boarded the taxi to Jerusalem. I did not feel secure until we got to the main highway. The trip, which lasted for 16 days, 11 more than was originally planned, was finally over. □

Current Fellows & Their Activities

Bacete Bwogo. A Sudanese from the Shilluk tribe of southern Sudan, Bacete is a physician spending two and one-half years studying health-delivery systems in Costa Rica, Cuba, Kerala State (India) and the Bronx, U.S.A. Bacete did his undergraduate work at the University of Juba and received his M.D. from the University of Alexandria in Egypt. He served as a public-health officer in Port Sudan until 1990, when he moved to England to take advantage of scholarships at the London School of Economics and Oxford University. [THE AMERICAS]

Cheng Li. An Assistant Professor of Government at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY, Cheng Li is studying the growth of technocracy and its impact on the economy of the southeastern coast of China. He began his academic life by earning a Medical Degree at Jing An Medical School in Shanghai, but then did graduate work in Asian Studies and Political Science in the United States, with an M.A. from Berkeley in 1987 and a Ph.D. from Princeton in 1992. [EAST ASIA]

Adam Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for East-West Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey's regional role and growing importance as an actor in the Balkans, the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Cynthia Caron. With a Masters degree in Forest Science from the Yale School of Forestry and Environment, Cynthia is spending two years in South Asia as ICWA's first John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow. She is studying and writing about the impact of forest-preservation projects on the lives (and land-tenure) of indigenous peoples and local farmers who live on their fringes. Her fellowship includes stays in Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka. [SOUTH ASIA/Forest & Society]

Hisham Ahmed. Born blind in the Palestinian Dheisheh Refugee Camp near Bethlehem, Hisham finished his A-levels with the fifth highest score out of 13,000 students throughout Israel. He received a B.A. in political science on a scholarship from Illinois State University and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California in Santa Barbara. Back in East Jerusalem and still blind, Hisham plans to gather oral histories from a broad selection of Palestinians to produce a "Portrait of Palestine" at this crucial point in Middle Eastern history. [MIDEAST/N. AFRICA]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. She plans to travel and live in Namibia and Zimbabwe as well as South Africa. [sub-SAHARA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. While with the ACLU, she also conducted a Seminar on Women in the Law at Fordham Law School in New York. [sub-SAHARA]

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