

Can You Hear the Cries from Gaza?

By SONJA KARKAR

No one seems to hear the cries from Gaza enough to act, despite the reports that talk about imminent economic collapse, dangerous food shortages, total aid dependency and impending humanitarian disaster. Neither the cries nor the reports appear in the headlines or news alerts in our mainstream media. And, while the statistics make shocking reading when they do emerge, it is the cries that we should be hearing because they come from people like us-- real flesh and blood people who bleed, feel pain and grieve. They are the cries that give rise to the statistics, the cries of Palestinians no less human and no less vulnerable than any one of us would be as prisoners of Israel's merciless occupation.

For all the recent news about the infighting that has gripped internal Palestinian politics, there is no mistaking under whose suffocating matrix of control, the Palestinians are actually forced to live. Israel has threatened the Palestinians' right to exist on their own land since it was created and it has no more disengaged from Gaza than it has from the West Bank. Instead, Israel has made a prison of Gaza and completely sealed it off from the West Bank and the outside world. Deeming it a place too dangerous to visit, Israel likes to portray the Palestinians as a violent people whose acts of resistance threaten Israel's existence and necessitate the punitive measures that Israel takes against them. However, according to international law, resistance is a legitimate response of an occupied people and collective punishment by an Occupying Power against a civilian population is prohibited. The outrage in all this is the world's acquiescence to Israel's suppression of the Palestinians and the oppressive force it uses to reduce them to a sub-human existence. This cuts to the core of our humanity and it is simply not enough to say, "there but for the grace of God go I".

Grim as the facts and figures are, they can never make us feel the agony of the mother who does not have a grain of rice left to feed her starving children, the desperation of the father who cannot get his sick child through the closed border crossing for treatment in Egypt, the terror of the child who wets the bed every night wondering if the soldiers will come again to ransack the house, the constant fear of school children knowing that even school is no haven from soldiers' bullets and mortar fire, the despairing distress of families who are not even given time to save their belongings as

bulldozers come to tear down their homes, the desolation of thousands of people with no jobs to go to, the helplessness of thousands more who have received no wages for months and the wretchedness of the starving families who depend on the jobless and the unpaid. An entire population is in shut down--more than a million stories of agonizing pain and overwhelming grief. But, no one is hearing the cries.

The shortages are getting worse by the day. Food is running out, fuel is running out, medicines are running out. There has been almost no electricity since Israel bombed Gaza's only power plant last year. Without electricity, water cannot be pumped. Without fuel, sewage cannot be pumped and the sewage is spilling out onto the streets contaminating the meager water supplies left. The stench of open sewage hangs over every neighborhood increasing the risk of disease and contagion. Running water is a luxury few have now, most having to queue to buy it. Children go out with plastic bottles and buckets to get their rations of water when and if supplies arrive. There is no refrigeration for fresh foods and in any case no fresh food is available. Even a staple like wheat is running out as the 600 tons of wheat needed daily is not getting through the Karni commercial crossing. Wherever one looks, there are faces of despair, but the very human cries from the depths of all this misery are not being heard.

Hospitals are overflowing with wounded people from Israel's aerial attacks and mortar shelling. Operating equipment is unusable as generators can no longer run without fuel. There are no medicines for the heart patients, diabetics, cancer sufferers and so many others. Doctors, nurses and health care workers are stretched to the limit trying to save lives and stop the pain when their own situations are desperate at home. Essential services can no longer cope with the demand. People are dying in their homes because they cannot get critical health care. Children are literally wasting away from malnutrition as they try to survive on a daily diet of bread and tea. Extreme hunger has driven many to scavenging the rubbish tips to find what they can to feed their families. And everywhere one looks, the greyness of dying has dulled the lifeblood of the people and still no one hears the cries of the sick and the wounded, the starving and the homeless and the keening sounds of people mourning their dead.

The list of impossible deprivations is about as awful as anyone wants to imagine. And with that come the daily, even hourly humiliations and indignities as Palestinians are pushed, prodded and targeted by Israel's soldiers, bombs, tanks, gun ships, warplanes and armed helicopters--an

awesome military line-up against a population that has nothing even comparable to fight back. This tiny teeming piece of Palestine has been reduced to a gigantic penitentiary in which the entire one and a half million Palestinian population is permanently incarcerated. And, it is in this violent unforgiving world that Israel continues to indiscriminately punish the people, their cries only muffled by the firing of mortar shells and the explosion of bombs dropped from the sky.

Amidst all this chaos, the effects of the sanctions are painfully obvious. One by one, factories and businesses have closed, government services have folded and jobs have become non-existent. So draconian are the sanctions and closures that the Palestinians in Gaza are likely to become one hundred per cent aid-dependent indefinitely. It is almost impossible now for an economy that had shown some promise before the imposition of sanctions, to recover. The lush market gardens that produced an abundance of fruit and vegetables lie dry and fallow without water while those first crops intended for export markets ended up rotting on trucks as they waited in long queues for clearance to leave Gaza, and none ever did. Nothing can get into Gaza either except for the most basic food aid, forcing many factories, unable to produce without the necessary materials, to shut their doors. Without supplies, businesses have also been forced to close, plunging both shop and factory owners into penury along with the rest of the population.

The deliberate ruination of the Gazan economy and the gradual disintegration of Palestinian society are entirely man-made. As the eye takes in the bombarded landscape, it is hard to imagine that the old Gaza was once a wealthy and important trading place where proud and dignified people welcomed travellers who came by land and sea. It is hard to imagine that its capital--Gaza City--was really once a beautiful metropolis with wide roads and parks, swaying palm trees and an expansive seascape. Over the years, hospitals, universities, schools and municipal council buildings have added a modern layer to one of the world's oldest cities, developing and expanding despite Israel's occupation. But all that has been destroyed and nobody seems to care what will happen to the shadows of people merging into the rubble. The worst of it is that Israel is supported - even praised - for what it is doing in the name of security when by any other name it is purely and simply ethnic cleansing. And with every moment of our silence, we acquiesce and give support to the atrocities that are being committed in our name.

As the siege on Palestinian life in Gaza tightens further, nobody asks what Israel plans to do with the Palestinians. For more than a year, various bodies have warned about the imminent collapse of Gaza's economy and social order. The list is formidable--the World Bank, Oxfam, UNRWA, CARE International, the World Food Program, B'Tselem, World Vision, UNOCHA, Amnesty International, ECOSOC to name a few, but nothing has been done other than to provide basic food aid. Israel, on the other hand, has only increased the pressure by refusing to open border crossings between Gaza and the outside world, refusing the transfer of funds and monetary aid and refusing to allow international NGOs to operate their assistance programs in Gaza. Its acts of violence have not ceased either. Rumours of a large-scale Israeli military operation which were already circulating well before Hamas ousted Fatah forces in Gaza, is more than likely still on the table. It will only be a matter of time before Israel will act to quell any eruption from this suffocating mass of humanity, no doubt citing a security threat as is Israel's wont. The action then is likely to be just as merciless as it was last year when Israel's bombers strafed the Gazan landscape targeting everything in sight--cities, villages, farmlands, schools, hospitals, government buildings, roads, bridges and essential services and the civilian population that could find no refuge anywhere and could not even flee out of Gaza.

Despite all the warnings and evidence on the ground, Gaza continues to slide dangerously towards a humanitarian disaster and world governments have done absolutely nothing to stop it. There has not been a word of censure against Israel and the international community's craven silence will only embolden Israel to continue its cruel, punitive actions against Gaza's already traumatised and dying people. We can choose to hear their cries or ignore them, but we certainly cannot say that "we did not know".