



*HELP DOCTORS, HUMANITAIRE  
ET ÉQUITABLE*

**GAZA? GAZA ! by Jean Michel Asselin**

Nobody has forgotten the war that began in December 2008 and ended in January 2009 in the Gaza Strip, Palestine. It turns out that Help Doctors, a French NGO, was one of the few foreign witnesses at the heart of the shelling. Help Doctors returned from that broken territory with the idea that we, Help Doctors, have to speak out. Not judge, not teach, but tell the stories they saw of everyday life in Gaza, stories that will make everyone wonder.

Our message is clear: thousands of Palestinians need help, call for help! This book wants to convey that Palestinians from Gaza are there, what they have lived, what they dream of for tomorrow.

The simple trip to Gaza, once by Egypt, once by Israel was a small adventure. It serves as a guide and leads us to Afaf, Zenat, Jamal, Khaled. Raicha, Khouloud, Awad, Ata Hermilat, Fayez ... So many stories, many men and women. It is they who tell with their own words, their truth and illusions

It is their lives we have gathered by making interviews with our translator Assia. The book is the result of work that began in February 2009 and ended in late April of the same year. We hope that we will up to the expectations of all these witnesses, and that through us, their words will carry their desire for peace.

**A simple desire of peace...**

**thanks to all those who believed in this project, and will recognize themselves.**

JEAN-MICHEL  
ASSELIN

## WHAT MADE ME ?

There is a doctor who told me: "what if I took you to Gaza, as you write, you could gather evidences, hear people talking about the war? Neither there nor here, nowhere, nobody listens, no one listens to them. Besides, you will see, they lack a voice, as sometimes arms and legs. It is the humanity of war, humanity kit, in parts. These peoples are irreparable. You could bring back words; I believe that their suffering has things to say. "

I thought of my childhood toys: broken limbs rabbit, hair plucked doll, plastic soldier who has lost the sword, and the arm holding the sword. Gaza, I am like everyone else, it is a noise on the radio, photos seen in magazines and on TV, people running in the street, explosions... It was pitch dark, we see clear despite everything, but this is not the moonlight that illuminates the scene: it takes place in the green light that allows the night position of small video cameras. It is ugly; it is not like in an American movie where even the bombs that blow up a village have a visual elegance, a showmanship. What I know about Gaza means nothing: always people who run away, still thick smoke, always people who cry when an injured person arrives on a stretcher. They cry as they seem frightened and you think that it will not be good for that man's health. You look at it from afar. They have so many problems; we were told that charity begins at home; we see little of what we could do. We do not know very well why they fight. Anyway it is far away, and they are not like us. They do not fear death; they love it enough to blow themselves up with a string of bombs around the abdomen. It, nevertheless, makes us wonder. And when it puzzles us too much, we leave them, we go play the lottery, defend our wages, fight against our miseries... or nothing, or next to nothing. It is God's will, after all! We just say that it must be heated in the area! Because we assume that war has something to do with fire. Do we not say: go to fire, the baptism of fire? The war, it must be done to burn calories, our extra calories.

I was in the sea, the Mediterranean, it was warm, I drank sangria with my love, when Doctor Regis called me from there. The voice was distant; tired and broken. Regis was in Gaza during the war, I know, since the morning in the bathroom, I shouted to Anne: 'Listen, this is Regis, it is the war in Gaza...' It made me proud, because I know, because we knew him for days and days in a war in lace, a friendly war, even if one might die, a fake war: the war between men and the mountain. For years, Regis was my doctor at daring and beautiful Himalayan expeditions.

This time, on TV, I saw his face, a picture embedded in the midst of these uncertain images I mentioned. He did not change: a lock of hair thrown over the side, glasses, and his way of talking when there is no room for hesitation; Regis, my emergency doctor, my Northern guy who liked to climb the heaps before plunging into the madness of the Himalayas.

It is almost funny and strange to listen to him in a bar where Salvador Dali may have sat, blue sneakers and a red cap. Regis said: "You'll have to come, there are too many stories of lives

that hang around here ..." I think it is right, immediately: as the dust, we do not leave the life and its stories.

## **REGIS AND HELP DOCTORS**

As an inside joke, in Rafah as well as in Gaza, we call Regis the Rais (leader in Arabic!). We are in a taxi in Cairo and the Rais explains: 'How to start a vocation? I just remember, when I was in first year of secondary school, we had a neighbor who told me about her work as a doctor in Afghanistan for Doctors Without Borders. Listening to her talking about mountains, incredible characters, adventure ... I told myself, I want to do that.

"After a bit of chaotic studies, I became a doctor and I realized that working in large humanitarian organizations, was a bit complicated. One thing leading to another, I ended up joining the SAMU mondial (World Emergency service) where I got my first mission: Mitch Hurricane in Honduras. In short, I quickly understood that there are some limitations with the official humanitarian action: little interest for local people and their resources (doctors, hospitals, etc.), and sometimes disproportionate means. Part of the work was for show off, On the other hand, the line between humanitarian and intelligence was blurred. It is the tsunami that inspired the idea of creating a different NGO, such as Help Doctors. We were aware, that beyond the ludicrous amounts of money that was available for this disaster, it was difficult to be caregiver, contractor, architect, manager, accountant and all those needed things at the same time ...

At that time I was director of Médecins du Monde (MDM) and head of the Palestine Mission. In the summer of 2006, I was in Gaza. The war was rumbling between Israel and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, Gaza was not spared. While there, I was immediately shocked by the large number of amputees and disabled, all injured in the same way. Many stories matched, I realized that we were dealing with prohibited weapons (cluster bombs among others) that had never been used so far. I alerted as many people as possible, the press also. Journalists contacted me and I told the suffering that these injured civilians lived, but this did not please the board of Médecins du Monde. When I returned to Paris I was sanctioned by the president of the organization. For MDM, we should have said nothing. This was too much for me; an NGO created to care for and testify, refused to fulfill its mission! Shortly after, reports had been spread widely, all international experts were positive, Israel had used cluster munitions in southern Lebanon and in Gaza in the summer of 2006. Naturally, with other physicians of MDM, we decided to create another NGO to return to essentials. We wanted to create an association based on fair humanitarian aid. One NGO made by and for people who need help with the least possible administrative running costs: it was not about creating a business venture or humanitarian salaries. All those who work for Help Doctors are people who already have a job, they come on their holidays, and they want to help... Our philosophy is to trust people who are there and be attentive to their requests.

"In this context, in January 9, 2009 - the war began December 27- we went in the Gaza Strip through Rafah since Israel had announced the creation of a humanitarian corridor for three hours a day. I went there with two double nationality surgeons, Dr Mamoun and Dr Mounir and Mehdi Fedouach, who was then engaged in logistics, security and also doubled as a photographer. The way we got there was epic; we waited for eight hours and barely had we crossed the Egyptian border that, in the middle of the night, we took a bus that was targeted by tanks. Red Crescent ambulances lead us to the Al Amal Red Crescent hospital in Khan Younes. After a night in the hospital, a little isolated and without surgical material, we decided to join the Shiffa hospital in Gaza City, which was full of injured of war. It was a risky journey since access to the north of Gaza was forbidden by the Israeli army. The tanks blocked the road, but with a column of ambulances, we finally passed and we found ourselves in a place where dead and injured arrived at a frightening pace. Very quickly, I realized that I was unable to be effective in the emergency room in a place where the living and the dead were dropped on the floor.

Thus I went to work at the surgery room. There, the injured arrived on the operating table, still dressed, all covered with blood. Sometimes, we had to amputate two or three patients in the same operating room, on stretchers or even on the floor. In this kind of place, you do not lack work. It is difficult to describe what we have seen, it is beyond horror!

As emergency doctors, we are used to see people in extremely bad conditions, but there, we were dealing with human beings in shreds. A real nightmare, the being and the body become so anonymous. Some seemed to have passed through a meat grinder, from feet to the trunk. Sometimes, we couldn't distinguish the front from the back, and we had to face the eyes of people dying a few minutes later and whose suffering was extreme.

"Then, on January 15, we left Shiffa and went to the Al Quds hospital. It was, at 10 o'clock in the morning, after a night of intense shelling, when a bomb destroyed and burned the administrative wing of the hospital. Next to us, a nine-story building was burning. We had to evacuate all the injured and sick with their beds to the ground floor. At that time, hundreds of families converged on the hospital, many with white flags to get to safety. They were trapped in their houses for nearly twenty four hours, under fire from tanks. Firemen managed to extinguish the fire about 2 pm, then, about 3 pm, we could take all injured back in the rooms. We then took the initiative to call the press, to alert the French Consulate in Jerusalem. Moreover, Al Jazeera had installed cameras everywhere and repeatedly showed the hospital on fire. Around 7 pm, I found myself with the team of surgeons of Help Doctors in a small room to get some rest. We hardly slept for several days and we ate very little. It was difficult to rest since the firing kept us on alert; it was even very dangerous to look by the window.

"Suddenly, a terrible explosion shook the building; we all thought it was near us, so we put on our vests to see what was happening. Panic reigned, it was dark and people were shouting,

smoke filled the entire building. The roof of the hospital was on fire and parts of the roof fell in the yard. We had gathered as many people as possible in the entrance hall but very quickly, we realized that we had forgotten the sick upstairs. With about 20 volunteers, we went back for them and one by one, we got them all out. We were a group of doctors, able bodied and injured, waving white flags in the middle of the street. The fire and bombs illuminated the scene just like the daylight. It was impossible that the soldiers did not see us ... Helicopters flew over us very often. When the shooting stopped, ambulances from Shiffa arrived to take everyone. We were certain that there was not a single safe place in Gaza and that, that night, it would be the turn of Shiffa to be bombed.

"During all those hours, I could reach by phone many reporters and denounce this unacceptable and flagrant violation of the International Humanitarian Law, which is shooting at a hospital full of injured and caregivers. I was accused of practicing journalism, it did not matter: we were in an emergency situation where it was important to alert and to testify. We did not assess the facts, we told, and we dared to say: Stop, stop shooting at old people and children!

"I affirm that among all treated people, we have never dealt with over trained young soldiers. In Gaza, we faced the absurd situation of people calling for help; but that we cannot help while they could not escape, This is a real prison: you must ask the jailer for permission to get in! Before the blockade, there were about 500 or 600 trucks of humanitarian aid entering each day, since then, only five or six, all the rest comes through the tunnels illegally, and therefore prohibitively expensive. The people of Gaza are in a situation of survival.

"During the first few days of the truce, the inhabitants came out, silent, joyless. They counted their dead, went to visit families, and those who had no homes had very few options besides waiting for humanitarian aid. Doctors then demanded us to establish a clinic for chronic diseases (hypertension, diabetes...) that are not really supported in time of war. For this reason, we came to look for funding in France to implement this clinic project in Khan Younis...

"The spirit of Help Doctors is based on the trust we place in people with whom we work on site. Help Doctors responds mainly to their requests and we empower them to create what will be most relevant, with the appropriate staff. We create jobs! Literally meaning, if politics is to participate in the life of the city, so we do politics. Of course, we could have waited until the war was over to come to treat the injured but in this huge open-air prison of Gaza, it was important to have witnesses! We are not saying that we are neutral; we say that we are impartial. A dead is always a dead, whether in Gaza or in Israel and that is intolerable. Some criticized us for not intervening in Sderot, but Israel, where war has killed fifteen people, including eleven soldiers, has never requested international humanitarian assistance; an understandable attitude, because this country was able to handle alone its injured. In Gaza, it is not the same thing: Palestinians were calling for help! There were 1500 dead in that

territory, thousands of injured and more than 30 000 people live in tents since the war, sometimes even without drinking water. We must forget for a while what is of the order of macro politics of states and get interested in the micro politics of human beings. In Gaza, at the time of the shelling, the only question that comes to mind is to wonder why a kid of seven years takes a bullet in the jaw, another in the chest and dies an hour after his arrival in the hospital, or why old men trail, distraught in a hallway with their external leg fixator because they are broken across after their house collapsed on them!

'In Gaza, as everywhere else in the world, the needs for life of people are incredibly banal: they want to work, to make sure their children do not get shot while going to school, to be able to move freely. Once the borders would open, Gaza people could trade, work freely and they would no longer need humanitarian aid. We must offer people possibilities to transform their world. Our goal is surely not to have fifty offices spread all over the world. "

Back to Grenoble, I expected Regis to be back to Lille. Every day I watched the news on TV and listened to the radio: a lot of noise around this hospital on fire in Gaza where Regis testified his indignation. And this picture that was circulating: the surreal pictures of the photographer Mehdi Fedouach, where we could see a building at night, illuminated, glowing like a celebration with fireworks. Except that there was no music of Jean-Michel Jarre. "There are injured in the street and we are with them", said Regis. There are babies in incubators and we are waving white sheets, not yet stained with blood, and we fear that we will be swept just like the floors of the burning hospital. Who has the right to kill those who are dying or just born? "

Once I knew that Regis returned home alive, I recalled ... "Yes, I want to see, hear and identify words, report. Neither of compassion or curiosity, nor for any militant commitment, I am simply unable to tell why. It would have been smart to say that this work was needed, that there was really no choice, that I followed a destiny, a natural inclination. I do not know, I just trusted Regis, who said "it's important." The important things are enough by themselves.

**The first question I was asked:  
"How can one go to Gaza?"**

*Around me  
few knew  
and me, certainly not.  
Do not laugh of stupid questions  
they reflect recklessness  
or what remains of innocence.*

I did not really think I would go to Gaza, to participate in a project in which I could imagine myself having an important role. Still, I asked around me, often with greater insistence with

people I was certain they would not understand, or very little. I decided not to go look on the internet, gather information, certainties, but I repeated the name of the NGO of Regis, Help Doctors, as a slogan, like a mantra. I must say that I felt, each time I reached him, that I called Help Doctor too! With no doubt, should I feel in danger, ill, or...?

One evening in a bar, I talked too much and regretted it: the desire of Gaza is not exactly as simple as boarding a plane to get there. Yet, that evening, with the help of a very good rioja, I think I approached the meaning of the trip. Yes, there was in me that tragic desire for adventure, but for once, there was also a feeling of the possibility of being useful, of not answering the crucial question of whom I would be useful for? By a disappointing I do not know it myself. No, I moved to reach people who actually cried help doctors, me, who have just an old certificate of rescuer. Reality settled painfully, between the necessary obligations of Mehdi, the good Dr. Mehdi (AFP photographer and owner of the fast food halal *New*), Francois, an emergency doctor at Saint-Etienne, Regis and of my own. We had the impression of not being able to go there.

### **FRANÇOIS GIRAUD THE VOICE OF AN ACTOR**

Francois has made several missions to Gaza. This doctor, who comes with us, did not travel during the war. With his beautiful voice, like Arditi, he said: "I am not going, very clearly, because my wife doesn't want, we have young children and the mission is dangerous. I totally agree with her. Usually, even if she is afraid, she insists that I live what I want to live, she would even be more likely to come with me... But Gaza, in the middle of the war, it is not exactly easy. However, because I update our site, and because I know Gaza and have many friends there, I really felt to live this mission". I was almost more involved than I wanted! Gaza, for our NGO, is somehow like the proof of fire, of our knighthood, and it has been a real recognition in the media world. For me, I think it is a high price to pay. I am neither a fighter, nor a kamikaze of humanitarian causes. But, even if we bring a drop of blessing in an ocean of suffering, we have to do so without being dupe! I remain very humble about this concept of relieving suffering. I never approached even one tenth of the pain that I have seen in some of the injured or sick at the far end of the world, but the simple fact that sometimes you put your hand on them, listen to them, is already something good in the life of crap they are going through. They see that there is something else, that there is hope.

"Once, I remember, they took me to see injured, but also dead people in the Shiffa hospital. See the dead, it is not insignificant, there are people who think that you came from afar, now that you know and you can talk! Especially, I have seen in those countries at war or in the middle of an earthquake that a human life is worthless; one can be crushed, humiliated, squashed, denied. I saw how the human being can be incredibly fragile. In this approach, which led me to treat people in different parts of the world, I often felt, especially in Gaza, of being where things happen, of not being offside. We understand better how we are all victims of where we are, we suffer because of where we were born. I have never been attracted by the

danger, the pleasure of the danger that these places generate, perhaps, however I have a certain taste for the exotic, the exoticism of the other, my fellow human, so different. I could tell two stories about Gaza...

"Once we were invited to meet, at the Shiffa hospital, an ambulance driver who had been shot while doing a rescue on the beach. The guy was battered with pain in his bed, we were around him with strange yellow blouses and plenty of officials crowded around him praising his qualities, his courage. The atmosphere was tragic, formal. And then Régis approached the injured man and said: "We are with you, my friend...!" putting his hand heavily on his shoulder, which made the guy scream; he had been shoot in the arm. It was horrible, but we could not help laughing!

"Less funny, the story of this little girl of six or seven years that I met in a hospital in Rafah... She had her arm plastered with protruding fixations, she was suffering, she was very pale. I asked what had happened, she had been shot! When you think that a soldier felt the need to aim this kid and shoot! What for, and for what purpose? That, I cannot understand".

And then it happened, gradually, as if we could only do so when we talk about Gaza, this land so full and so empty: over a million and half people are crammed in this corridor by the sea, about forty kilometers long by fifteen wide, a too big wasteland for children of the dust. Dates, other people, appointments, photocopies of passport: everything has accumulated, piled up, and I was told I was leaving a Tuesday, February 10. At home, I saw that the trip raised a concern, this same concern that prevented me, for instance, from telling my mother about that journey, my mother who still claims, even though I passed fifty, knowing what hat keeps me warm on the slopes of the Everest. Around me, friends thought it was great. Curious, as every time I announced my departure, many seemed surprised, doubtful, admiring, worried ... If I take off the cynics who only think and comment how to avoid doing, I got a lot of sympathy. They sent me messages, gave me address: it is amazing how many people I met knew someone in the area. Amazing how, suddenly, Gaza became a reality other than a column of the press. With friends, I met a Palestinian in Grenoble... He lives in the heart of the Alps for several years, unable to return home. His contact with his wife and children is a daily phone call.

Not being able to return home, what a funny matter! Is that possible here? In this world, who leads the movement of the beings? What is a closed border?

4 o'clock in the morning, Anne put me in front of a bus. I complied fully with the instructions of Régis; I only have a small bag that will travel with me in the cabin. We go to the airport. The plane should take off at 1 pm, an Air France flight to Cairo. Then, Régis explained, it is the unknown, the uncertain. We imagined a scenario that would allow us to cross the Egyptian-Palestinian border. A taxi would take us, after a night at a hotel in Cairo, and drive me, towards the Rafah border. This border, we know, is closed for several days. And we

travel right during the turmoil of the Israeli elections. What chances do we have that the border opens for the small group of Help Doctors?

Our mission is double: to continue the creation of the clinic in Gaza, listen to the injured, the convalescents, the dying, the tired, the desperate, the angry, the hungry, the homeless...

Regis wants to try to enter in this part of the world where events are likely to share a different logic. It is not impossible that this border will be closed today and only half opened tomorrow. We should be there, in front of the gate, hoping, believing, fighting with some recommendations from the embassy and all these parallel pathway contacts more or less influential. Regis is at the airport, phone to the ear, and his big heavy bag that he drags: these are our four bulletproof vests, with their metal plates, supposed to withstand the firing of tanks! What a strange equipment, I am intrigued by this luggage, how shall we manage to pass through customs with such oddities?

Francois Giraud has arrived. He is a quiet man; I think it suits him to live in the hills of la Haute-Loire and to be a doctor. I just need a few minutes to tell myself that with him, things will flow naturally. Mehdi, our photographer, is late. Mehdi is a phenomenon; he has something of the most irascible wrestler and the kindest boy. Mehdi is of Moroccan origin, solid as a rock, but also sensitive as a child. We can see that in his photos where he combines violence and tenderness. They will be the companions of this strange adventure.

## **MEHDI**

Clean shaven head, bull neck, body of a heavyweight boxer, a rock in the open air, he says: "Mehdi Fedouach, he dutifully spells first name and family name, I am forty-one, I am of Moroccan origin and mashallah! (Thanks God, that is how he often punctuates his sentences), I am a photographer with the AFP (Agence France Presse). I first started writing lyrics because there was not much room for photographers. I worked for both l'Humanité and VSD magazine, until I was able to get my press card. Then I got it at the AFP agency in Rouen, but in me, there was always the desire and the determination to become a photographer. I thought that writing had too many limitations, we often wrote the same thing: changing dates of demonstrations, banners and also the number of participants, but it was almost a work of copy-paste. Of course, we could put some color in our papers, but articles were read and reread, corrected and rewritten, while with a picture, you write as you want, nobody can change it, you cannot remove the least detail. Well, that is how I started, with the help of my parents.

"In 1998, I went to the Balkans; I photographed the first refugees, victims of the war with the Serbs. Seeing the arrival of these traumatized and hurt people, I wanted to go see what they had left. I thought they have left much on the road and I wanted to discover what was at the source, what chased them away. On site, somehow, I managed with the military telling that I

worked for a specific agency; I knew they could not check everything, and I could make my first pictures. I made several trips and I was not really worried about selling my pictures, my goal was to gain experience.

I went to Palestine during the first Intifadah, I discovered my first Palestinians in Jordan, they have opened my eyes to their suffering and I could follow them to Ramallah, Nablus or Gaza. There was also Africa, with Sierra Leone and Liberia. It seemed that in these areas in conflicts, I had room to express myself, my photographs speak more and more and I wrote a lot. After that, I went to Iraq that I visited in secret by the Turkish Kurdistan. I have lived long waiting times (nearly three months) during which I had to negotiate with smugglers, but also with my own agency that did not want one of its journalists to take too many risks.

Later, I entered Falouja with the Americans. It heated badly with lots of bombarding and shooting! I traveled throughout the South, I was in Basra after the departure of Saddam Hussein, at that time, some doctors were taken hostages I discovered the hospital of Basra, the injured and the sick that nobody could relieve because caregivers lacked everything. It was after this trip that I created my NGO *Regardez* (look), to witness the distress of the humanity. In 2005, I discovered the famine in Niger, I did not know the horror of empty stomachs. All these children we see and are no longer alive the next day. I went to Somalia even though everyone discouraged me. It was war, drought, famine, and when I crossed the border, I came upon the warriors of the Sharia, by chance, some spoke Arabic and the feeling passed. So, I got an escort of twenty armed men who took me everywhere I wanted to go. I have seen dozens of children dying in shacks that served as improvised hospitals, lacking everything. Behind these stories of vigilance and emotion, the encounter with Help Doctors was natural and obvious.

Regis told me about his NGO and here we go, the adventure had begun in Nablus, Bangladesh, then Gaza... I think I cannot believe everything I read, I need to see with my own eyes. Not that I have lost confidence in what my colleagues tell, but I am too hard to imagine that human beings can be as bad as I hear sometimes. I want to be optimistic, keep hoping, I say that I will see less dramatic things there. And of course I am disappointed, very disappointed, I constantly see men detaching from themselves, leaving what is the essence of the human being. Selfishness rules the world.

"As for the risks I take? Yes, yes I am scared and I know that we must never lose the fear. Once we lose it, we should get it back, or else we may die. One day, I was with my assistant in a field with tanks destroyed by the allies; fortunately I remembered that this place was full of mines! In turning back, I almost stepped on one of them and I showed it to my assistant who was as scared as I was. We returned to the car with infinite care. Another time, I was in Baghdad at night in an armored vehicle that had been bogged down, fighters were shooting and I saw the legs of the GI who was standing in the turret and trembling like a leaf, he shot continuously and I was covered with empty cartridges. In these moments, it is important to be

afraid. Another time in Africa, the fear allowed me to tell stories to a group of warriors whom I made believe that I left something for them across a river; I dived down in water full of crocodiles, but between two evils, I preferred the crocodiles!

"For me, it is important to participate with Help doctors, it is important to testify, it is important not to remain silent. Even if I do not believe it is possible, we should remain objective, which is different from being neutral.

"Being objective is to separate things. I often think I should slow down, especially now that I have a three and a half years son, I am not really alone! But nothing to do, it is stronger than me; I cannot help but go to those places where history is being written. Gaza was a very tough mission, with hard images; violent. I still see bins full of limbs because the surgeons did not stop cutting, they cut out all the time, I wondered what I am going to find when I come back later: a world of people who walk with crutches, I was living in Gaza in a curious situation, since many people thought I was a doctor, we just have to make the best of things, since it was impossible to go there as a reporter, I was one of the Help Doctors, which has been a white lie since I have been involved with this NGO.

I was called to the bedside of a girl who was maybe eight years; I went with the doctors in the operating room. She was lying, covered until her chest with a sheet, IVs, deadly face, almost gray, she could hardly breathe. At one point, one of the surgeons removed the sheet and then, I saw with absolute horror that from the lower part of her body to the heels, she was like an open book, and her flesh was full of rubble. She would die and it was unbearable. There was also this other girl who looked at me lying in her stretcher, she looked lost, I asked where her parents were and she immediately started screaming, crying. In fact, a little later, I heard that she had just come out of the ruins of her house. She has been there for more than twenty four hours, next to the dead bodies of her parents and her brother, with her leg opened...

"In this war, people were talking about surgical strikes, what a lie! We, we can testify: they are old ladies, children, just ordinary people, and never young fighters who filled the hospitals and morgues. We had to be in Gaza; we had to return and, even if we had to get stuck at the border, it is important. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. If we want to testify, we must be present where 'History unfolds, we must refuse that wars be blind!

"I am Muslim, believer and practicing, and I think that God teaches us to be tested. God rewards us in what we do well but also in the hardship. We believe in heaven and hell. If God had created man good, there would be no hell, but God has created us free to be guided by our reason, and has created a paradise for those who want it. In this context, the fate of Gaza is terrible... hence the importance of participating in the destiny of others! "

## CAIRO AIRPORT

February 10

It is late, the flight went as usual, slow and too fast. Mehdi, the good Dr Mehdi, spent his time chatting with a pretty brunette, and I am stuck in my seat with the company of a basketball player. I am amazed that no one has asked us about those strange bulletproof vests that should not be in a tourist's suitcase. Our hotel is located near the airport, but we go to the souk, in Nagib Mafouz (a restaurant bearing the name of a writer that I must read) to eat pigeons a typical Cairo dish. A short night, as the taxi of Ayman is supposed to take us at 4 am. I looked on a map: we will be crossing the Suez Canal, and following the long road to Rafah by the sea and the desert.

The closer we get to this famous Rafah border, the less I look at the countryside, I just wait to see this country of war, this country of which I heard the name one hundred, one thousand times, on the radio, on TV; a country that does not exist outside the background noise of weapons. What will I see? What is war and peace? Periodically, we are stopped by armed men. We must show passports, give our recommendation letter translated in Arabic. We must smile. And each time, it is OK and we are weaved through with only the rocking of the engine breaking the monotony of the silence. I see the sand, Bedouin tents, camels, sometimes the sea, I think of Moses, in the person, of course, of Charlton Heston! I have the feeling that it is easy to go into this Gaza Strip, that it would be enough to move forward and believe. Then it is there, a large yellow concrete gate, as if the highway was cut short, the Egyptian flag flies over the central column. Armored vehicles parked on each side, soldiers with shields and amazing helmets coming out of the paintings of Abu Simbel, soldiers in kaki and men in civilian clothing with the butt of the revolver over the belt. Here the secret services have a name: the Moukhabarats. It is best to avoid crossing swords with them.

Two black metal gates, left and right, control inputs and outputs, but no vehicles appear to cross this barrier. On the side, behind the army vehicles, fields, small trees (almond?) bloom timidly. We parked near some civilian vehicles whose roofs are full of suitcases and bags. On the ledge of a wall, women, men, some children sat wise, they wait. Our arrival seemed to awaken. No sooner have we got out of our car, we are going to the gate with our papers to be presented to a military officer...

**Of course we will enter, well, I think!**

## THE ENTRY DOORS OF RAFAH

We wear all four the t-shirt "Help Doctors", and it is Mehdi that, in Arabic, is responsible of negotiating with the police on duty. Yes, we have our recommendation letters; yes we can give our passports and all possible photocopies... A man approached us; he indicates with his clothes, his polished shoes, in English, he explains that he was there for six days, that he is Palestinian and that they prevent him from returning. He says he sleeps under a tree. He tells us he wants to see his mother; that we must help him as we are Help Doctors, and then he turns around us, muttering Help Doctors. Our papers are in the hands of a man in civilian, almost charming; we could imagine him working as a butcher in a mall. Around us, the ringing of phones! In Gaza, they call it Jawal. And it gives Oum Kalthoum instead of the voices of Elise or Christophe Willem! Of course our papers are not appropriate: we need a fax from the embassy... Ten times, twenty times, the fax is sent to an unlikely place which is never the right one, since nobody seems to receive it, but no one either wants to give the right number. Kafkaesque? No, just the game, the stupid game that is played so often by those who hold little parcels of power. Landscape and people are frozen. The sun leads the dance, not far behind the door of concrete we can see the houses in Rafah. What a strange thing to know all these people around us who simply want to return home and who cannot.

At the right of the doorway, in a makeshift shack, they serve coffee in doubtful glasses. And we can find a few boxes of biscuits. On the roadside, all dressed in black, women of whom we see the brightness of the pupil under their dark cover sitting on the floor. They sell goat milk in old plastic bottles and with the back of their hands, they chase away flies that land on their packages of dates and almonds. Apart from the comings and goings of a few taxis and armored sand-colored military vehicles, donkeys and small carts go by. They are lead by children who pass by the soldiers and head towards the rows of fruit trees. Inside the zinc covered garage, a prayer hall, an improvised mosque has been set up, where you can see the soldiers taking off their shoes, not their handguns. Waiting, waiting, waiting with only the ringing of the phones punctuating time. An officer arrives who gives us back our passports, though unable to tell us what has happened... The border post is expected to close at 5 pm. Yes, tomorrow we will be there, and every day, for the following six days. We knew weeks later that some humanitarian personnel had waited not been allowed to enter for more than fifty days, trying even a hunger strike.

That evening we returned to El Arish, some forty kilometers from Rafah Gate: dead city. It is a popular Egyptian holiday resort during the summer, facing the sea, long sandy beaches: hotels and chalets, as they say. Beautiful enough to make you weep. The hotel where we are is almost empty, but very expensive. The public: some Westerners (reporters, NGOs, adventurers) and then the Egyptian police in civilian. On the tables, in the bar where we drink a beer, nobody hides: weapons are carelessly laid beside the computer. We, we send emails; make phone calls from one side to the other of the border. Palestinians wait for us, worried, impatient, what will be the clinic that Help Doctors want to set up in the southern Gaza Strip?

Which sesame to open such doors? Meals at Aziz in town, this strange town without women, without laughs, where the sea is more beautiful than all the dreams of the Mediterranean can ever be.

At dawn, we headed to Rafah Gate again; searching for the military officers, , moving from one soldier to another, from one hierarchy to another, shaking hands with a fake general. We met with Egyptian doctors who want to enter, just like us. Among them, Enas, filming everything that happens. Barley veiled, this young doctor, a delight to watch, humanizes this place in the middle of nowhere. I also met Tony, an Egyptian who has a passion for Baudelaire, who claims to be a psychiatrist and wants to enter Gaza because he wants to collect folk songs of Palestine. I asked if they really sing on the other side of the barrier. He hopes. He leads me cautiously through fields so I may see Rafah from a hill. He also showed me a tunnel that has been blocked. The famous tunnels that are the arteries of the Gaza Strip: everything passes through the trenches dug in the sand by children, who, the most optimistic say they are paid \$ 100 a meter. There are tunnels everywhere in the area but this February, even if the traffic never stops; it costs up to \$ 1,000 to a novice who wants to cross the border, caving version. Bombings, more or less regular, remind us that this kind of pathway is illegal. What hypocrisy, however: everyone knows where they are, who digs, where they lead, and what passes through these galleries: motorbikes, diapers for children, dishwashing liquid, money, TVs, washing machines, refrigerators and - inevitable- weapons... How to explain that the Israeli army, the most feared and powerful IDF has not reduced to dust these underground channels that represent an annual economy of hundreds of thousands of dollars? In the midst of small trees, there is a hole that stones have filled, only a minute away from the soldiers.

Rafah is clearly visible, a few hundred meters away. Back to the metal gate, I meet Abir. She should be just thirty years old and looks like a star. What a beauty! Abir Habib is married, has three children and her husband is right there next to her; he chews thoroughly a chocolate bar, smokes a cigarette, when he has finished, he takes a biscuit; the cycle is endless. He shakes his head saying: "Put yourself in front of the gates, force them to open. We, they do not listen to us, they tell us to go to hell". Abir is strangely dressed, heeled shoes, baggy trousers and a leather jacket. She wears a purple scarf, and hides, from time to time, her eyes behind extra-large sunglasses. With a Canadian passport, Abir fled January 8 to Jordan with some of her family during the war. There, facing the black metal gate of Rafah, she makes constant comments against those who refuse to let her go home. Abir is never at a loss for words, she has regularly challenged the prison guards who hold the keys to the Gaza prison. The more the sun shines on us, the more the tension increases. Nadia, a young Russian-Palestinian who claims to be over twenty years, discusses firmly with Abir Habib. Her head is just covered with a keffiyeh and has green eyes that do not smile. She seems as hard as a rock; she looks like a teenager, always furious, when I ask: "Are you sometimes afraid in this country?" She looks at me, right in the eyes and, in one breath, she says with no hesitation: "I am not afraid of anything, ever!"

Around 1 pm, while nothing happens, while Abir, as we all, believe that we entertain the soldiers, both girls and children spread out a checkered blanket in front of the gate and sit. Mehdi takes his camera and the military shows up right away; no way that this little band blocks the entrance, even though no one passes. The tone raises, Abir and Nadia go from laughter to tears and, without embarrassment, they insult Egyptian soldiers and policemen who want to avoid the scandal... Still promises, a civilian appears, calms people down, looks at passports, promises he will investigate the matter... Wait is the key word... "Wait, yells a man, we do nothing but wait" and adds: "I hate the Egyptians, why can I not go see my kids, my house is a few kilometers away?" Waiting, many people smoke, I got used to too sweet coffee, I alternate with tea... its surreal: for three days, we will live this absurd waiting near a door. Only new arrivals (Moroccan doctors, Korean doctors, and some crazy others that battlefields attract) animating this theater. We meet Mata Hari, a strange young woman who, two seconds after we have met, reveals us her secret identity: she is a reporter and investigates about young Europeans who live the jihad, the holy war. Yes, yes, she has a plan to pass, if ever the border does not open, she whispered the word tunnel. I looked at her, with her white trousers, her white shirt! And I really have doubts when she goes to ask Dr. Francois: "In fact, these famous tunnels, where are they?" there is also the one we nicknamed Buffalo Bill, a French who attends prayers with Mehdi and who also thinks of moving in secret. He wants to film the Gazans: "I owe them that!" With his long hair, the character is not unpleasant but seems just a little disoriented, he looks like something out of a Bukowski novel.

From time to time, ambulances arrive in front of the gate. And of course there are one or two patients inside, obviously they are the only ones allowed to pass, but the incredible thing is that the hospital is filled with lots of stuff. The patient with the IV is just sitting between a fridge and two TVs, boxes of cans, chairs and washing machines! Near us, a man and his daughter who has just been operated wait. Without the ambulance, they will not pass and neither this couple standing near the gate: the pregnant wife who has a hard time standing while the husband negotiates. At 5 pm, this little world packed up, haggard, and with traces of tears go back in the taxis that are waiting. Once again, El Arish... where our driver has prepared a surprise: a small detour to the city stadium. In this space are stored trucks, hundreds of big trucks: international aid for Gaza. Algerian, French, Tunisian and Egyptian trucks that still have banners on their tarps: Save the children of Gaza... The driver thinks we can take some pictures! Unfortunately, barely he gets out of the car that he is badly lectured by a civilian, who does not hide a big gun fixed in his belt ... No way that witnesses see this waste of trucks, some of which contain perishables, waiting for a hypothetical opening of the border, weeks later! This time, we rented a house, bought some blankets and some coffee. Every day, it will be the same thing until our departure. Moving to Rafah gate, share the time waiting with newcomers: organizations of human rights, doctors, friends of Palestine...

And every day, we renew our hopes, and, then, by the end of the day, only disappointments. The Egyptians do not really want to open Rafah Gate. Officially, they obviously prefer to simply ignore the traffic held a few hundred meters away from the border, via tunnels. In

reality, the shortage and the black market are deliberately structured in Gaza; we can say, for example, the cost of a gas cylinder is a hundred times more expensive than on the Egyptian side.

Each day has its own rhythm, the only certainty, the prayer that breaks the agitation or the sluggishness of waiting. More and more Palestinians, who wait in front of the gate, get angry. I can hear Abir talking about a hunger strike and every official car that takes the pathway creates a mini riot. In the middle of the day, teary and angry, women and children take place against the gate, determined not to move. A blanket on the floor and quickly, the tone rises. A car appears, the soldiers intervene, Abir insults them, Nadia is turned back, she struggles, she screams, the men come up... Then everything evaporates, how could they resist against these walls of prison guards who keep the border? We are about forty people who want to pass, but a real army prevents us. In a move somewhat desperate, Abir slips into an opening when the gate opens, she is immediately stopped, pushed firmly (but with some caution because there are too many witnesses) she gets a bruise on the arm. We try to call reporters, speak of injustice, and we are almost surprised that someone still wants to hear this kind of information! Gaza is still in war. A large trail of black smoke spreads in the burning sky of midday, a bombing?

I talk with Jamal, who waits for the improbable; he left just before the war to study in Russia and here he is, lost in this dead end. In his anger, he said: "What I want is that, one day, I will be able to give my children another passport than the Palestinian passport... I even gave them international names so that they can travel, not like me, I can not even return to my prison. For three months I have not seen any member of my family, I can just hear my son on the phone. He is only three years old and recognizes already the sound of an F16 aircraft, the ones that bomb Gaza! "Then he changes the subject and asks me my diagnosis as a psychoanalyst for Sarkozy! He repeats over and over again that the French hero is, forever, Jacques Chirac that he imitates in his speech, the day he was a bit shaken by the Israeli soldiers – it is the first time I hear the word Yahoud, very pejorative word for Jew - "You want I go back to my plane?" We both laugh. Ali Houssein, who worked in the USA, came back to find his wife and his children: "Why do the Egyptians keep us prisoners? We know they want to pressure Hamas to sign a truce with the Palestinians, but us, this is not our problem, we just want to be with our families. "Nearby, Iman Abu Daka shows up, she is a teacher in Gaza, she fled when the war began, and since then, resigned, she waits: "It is a curse." Mehdi is full of surprises; it is his voice that we hear calling the prayer that many soldiers, disciplined, attend! Later, Mehdi tells me how during the war in Gaza, the day of the truce during Friday prayers, the Imam of the mosque of Khan Yunis thanked Help Doctors for their help to the injured.

Once again in the evening we returned to El Arish, once again empty handed, demoralized. Regis does not know what to say to those who expect us on the other side of the border and who need Help Doctors. None of us really likes shawarma, shish Taouk or the hummus of Aziz any more. By the sea, tonight, I watch the lights on the water: warships, fishing boats?

There, around Gaza, even fishermen are rare; Israeli patrol boats force them to stay close to shore. The port (funded by the European Union) is destroyed, just like the airport! Yes, Gaza was, long ago, a lovely place. Today is Friday, a holiday, the day of the great prayer, is that why we cannot pass, and tomorrow? Tomorrow, Inshallah!

Neither tomorrow, nor after tomorrow... Doctors of the Henri Mondor Hospital in Paris, others from Morocco, Korea and our team of Egyptian doctors have insisted that we send an official protest. It was written in four languages! Vainly, of course, but it is never vain to tell, even when words get lost in the sands of the desert. In the restaurant of El Arish, where you can eat fish of the day, we prepare to go home; for Gaza, it is over, and it is sad... A French team arrived, young women with the eyes outlined with kohl, boys who all belong to a movement of Palestinian friendship. They want to pass Rafah Gate. I surprised them looking at Regis with a real sense of respect, and yes, it is him, in flesh and blood, who was under the bombs in Al Quds hospital. We wish them good luck, the old Egyptian Mercedes is waiting for us and, in Cairo, we will stay with friends. When I ride this car, I just say, the time is near For sure!

## **GAZA ON THE ROAD AGAIN - OF COURSE**

I had to wait until March, March 28, to get in a plane towards Gaza. Thanks to a very efficient work of the French consulate in Jerusalem, we obtained this precious coordination with Israel, which should allow us to move to Gaza, this time by Erez border post. It was a surprise, no time to prepare, to think: we just go.

I admit that I was very proud at the moment of leaving, Regis praised the quality of the reception organized by the Israeli security so much that, without having done anything wrong, I was already feeling guilty... Our team is different: Regis, the leader, the Rais, Dr Marie-Laure Dr. Marie-Laure Bry (a GP as the Palestinians say, a general practitioner) and myself, freshly psychoanalyst! A Night Flight and a big book to forget the dead time of waiting (an Indian novel: A Best man, fated title). Regis has abandoned the flak-jackets; he has instead to take his satellite phone, just in case...

## **G. P. MARIE-LAURE (OR DOC MARIE-LAURE BRY)**

If there was an important figure in this veiled and raped world of Gaza, Marie-Laure Bry (that everybody called Dr. Marie) embodies it. Gaza is not a world without women, it is a world of suffering women and Marie-Laure could immediately comfort those we would meet. More than once, we could enter a home because our small team had in its ranks Assia, the translator, and Dr. Marie.

G.P. means, I believe, general practitioner. Basically, it is our good old family doctor. Except that old, for Marie-Laure, it does not match. This young woman, dark, delicate, mother of three children, appears to be out of an oriental novel, heroin of Loti or Lacamp. She came to Gaza to prepare the clinic and participate in this job so simple in appearance, so heavy in fact, the job of listening. Two were not too many to receive the exposed, the exploded words.

"I was born in Paris, with this little feature of having a Vietnamese mother. My Vietnamese grandmother arrived in France at the age of nineteen to escape an imposed husband. Curiously, Marie-Laure speaks with her as a third person, which gives this delicious "Hello grandma, how is she doing?" In my earliest memory, I always had the calling of humanitarian medicine but it became clear after a movie. I was eight or nine years old and the movie name was the Inn of Sixth Happiness. That movie was inspired, I think, by a true story; it retraced the epic of a woman who had saved a hundred Chinese children by making them cross the country to escape the Japanese attackers. I immediately wanted to belong to this family of rescuers, caregivers. At the age of thirteen, I worked for associations as a volunteer and, unfortunately, I was not good at science subjects, so I did arts-oriented high school studies, but they do not precisely lead to studying medicine. I thought then I should turn to the job of juvenile judge.

"At that time, I had a decisive meeting, I talked a lot with a friend of my parents, a psychiatrist, and he gave me this simple message: we must always try to make our dreams come true, otherwise we will regret it all our life. I listened to him, I believed him, and finally I managed to study medicine. Then, somehow, life upset my plans, I had children early (I had not even finished my studies) and when I started to ask about Medecins du Monde, or Doctors Without Borders, I soon saw that I could not leave for short missions. Then I had the opportunity to go with my family live in Indonesia, Borneo, for two years and a half, but it was not easy to work with local associations. A year after our return to France, the opportunity came to go back again with the family to Indonesia, in Jakarta this time.

Then I met a small team of MDM that had an exploratory mission in the slums of Jakarta and also near the Punan tribes in the forests of Borneo. I spoke a little Indonesian, I was available, and their projects were consistent with what I wanted to do, so I naturally found my place in the team. Then, in December 2005, when the tsunami happened, I went to Banda Aceh, and there I realized that my childhood dream was coming true. Even though drifts from this humanitarian enthusiasm did not escape my attention, I felt that I had found my place, and knew why I was there. Then there was the creation of Help Doctors, of which I became the Treasurer and, soon after, the Palestinian adventure. My first mission took place in Nablus, where we created a clinic. I had no preconceived idea about this part of the world, and, along with Regis Garrigue and Ayman, it almost seemed to me easy, too easy.

"I was with excellent guides. Ayman with his warmth, generosity, helped me understand Nablus and its codes; these are places where you have to take time. Of course, the ideal would be to speak the language, it creates a richer exchange, I had such a different relationship with my patients in Indonesia when I started talking to them in Indonesian. Gaza is a first, once we had tried to enter but we had remained stuck at Erez. The difference from Nablus is that even if there is no war, this tension is very, very strong, obvious, it is exhausting. People, physically and mentally, are not at all healthy.

When we leave by the Erez terminal, we really feel out of High Security Area in French Prisons. With the scanner, controls, cameras, everything gives the feeling of leaving a prison. I was, however, impressed by the quality of analysis, retrospect, and depth of thinking of certain people we have met and have seen how meetings with the outside world keeps give them hope. But more often we meet stunned people, holding their breath, psychologically destroyed. I will always wonder how people can impose on others so much suffering while there are already so many reasons to suffer in this world. It seems that history is not that useful!

"For women, it is obviously an additional suffering, although I found that all those we interviewed talked relatively easily. I would love to go back there to talk to some young women we have seen, as the daughter of Dr. Waleed who was the only non-veiled women we met... To me, these people are living a nightmare, their confinement is a nightmare, immediately, it is essential that they can speak, tell, witness. We have witnessed scenes of hysteria, very understandable, when the pain is such, and the words refuse to come out, it is the body that speaks. It was very disturbing, for example, that despite a great shame, an old man falls into our arms and cries uncontrollably. As long as these people are not free, we must go to them, listen to them. It is a duty. As for solutions? What else if not freedom? the freedom to come and go... the freedom to live normally. I imagined that if we were to open the doors, all Gazans would flee the country, but not all, all of them have told us first of their love of their land, of their country, and all would like to live again that time of before the weapons, before the blockade, that time they could work, go to the cinema, to the beach, or travel, laugh, trade and meet friends.

"Caring? It is relieving someone of his physical or moral pain, to restore well-being. Being a generalist allows you to go the simplest way, to have a global vision of the person, among the necessary qualities you need to have a lot of common sense. Today, I work for the town of Paris on the theme of addiction. It is both working on body and mind, working on the insecurity, the exclusion ... In Gaza, we are dealing, simply and unfortunately, with champions of insecurity and exclusion."

## FROM BEN GOURION TO EREZ

"What is the purpose of your visit in Israel?" This is the first sentence that I will hear coming down the plane at Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv. Regis briefed us; we take all three the same method, only answer the asked question, not add details or exceed the question. The exit is almost too easy! Few questions, I must say it is one o'clock in the morning and we look like simple tourists. A taxi takes us to Jerusalem to the Arab quarter. We cross lit areas of highways lined with buildings, a feeling of prosperity, abundance. During the rest of the night, I did not sleep, I waited for Gaza, and here it is... just a few hours away, and it is tomorrow.

Yes, this morning we are all three happy, tired and happy. First, the taxi follows the path of the under construction tramway, a French tramway which, they say, will have this bad taste of crossing town without stopping in the Arab quarter! I think I am in Rabbi Jacob, the movie, facing all those people wearing hats, oddly dressed, in the street! I see names that have rocked my childhood: Jetsemani, Mount of Olives, and the Dead Sea... In just over an hour, we reach the famous Erez terminal. Buildings like giant warehouses, walls made of high blocks of concrete... A guard, a young woman, checks carefully our passports, some very young men in jeans and shirts, cap backwards, but machine gun carelessly placed on the shoulder, talking and laughing loudly. Only one question: do you have weapons?

This terminal has the particularity of not being attached to an airport. It leads to Gaza Strip; one might as well say: nowhere. Travel case in hands, we pass through endless corridors, crossing metal gates, kind of grinder... It is like a maze with walls of bare concrete, just like those that could have been described by George Orwell in the best of the worlds. It is hot, cameras observe us, we walk in a world of comics, gray and scary. And then everything stops, behind a last gate: the line of a deserted road, half broke up, blue sky, another world... We walked perhaps 1 kilometer along flattened buildings like pancakes, crushed by a giant hammer. Far, further away, a sentry box, a table and an umbrella and waiting cars: Gaza. We are in Gaza!

Jamal, the friend of Regis, helps us get into the taxi of Aouni. Jamal reminds me Toscan Du Plantier! And Aouni would be perfect for a supporting role in a film by Lautner. Entering Gaza city, I did not initially see much: the portraits of martyrs, giant portraits of big fellows posing with a very large Kalashnikov. Soon, I see that here only old cars travel, plenty of donkey carts. I see that there are swarms of children everywhere. And then I see one destroyed house, reduced to rubble, a building with a part that seems to have been atomized. I see a world that has nothing to do with that world seen on the other side of the border. I see poverty, almost joyful stir, a swarming, and so many other broken homes of which we can only see the concrete slabs laid on the floor, like a destroyed body, they exhibit pipes, wires, strips of plastic, iron. We arrived at our little hotel: Marna House with floating tobacco odors of rose or apple, the shisha tobacco. This time, for six days, I belong to Gaza.

My interpreter, Assia, is a little woman with a mischievous smile. She lived in Algeria and speaks French elegantly. With Aouni, the driver, and sometimes Dr. Mary, we are a good team. A Gazan Association of Human Rights (Al Mezan) provided us with names, addresses, telephone numbers; they have also shown a collection of bombs, bullets and other rockets gathered here and there, and all files (hundreds of them) where they collect the testimony of victims. Then it is like a snowball when it starts to roll! The small museum of horrors may begin.

## **ZUHDI AND THE SLEEPING BOMB**

Our journey to the land of the night starts at Beit Lahiya in northern Gaza. Beit Lahiya, Assia said, is the capital of donkeys. We passed through streets with partially destroyed houses. Those still standing shelter a little world that begins to stir, without doubt, it must be a bit early? It's time for coffee and we go to the father of Assia, Zudhi Khilani. Zudhi Khilani, sixty-six, is a highly respected man, a wise man who gave all his life to Palestine. As an introduction, Assia presents me each time, explaining that my job is to gather their stories and to collate/ them in a book. To do this, I have notebooks and pens!

Zudhi's house is situated at a crossroads. We see traces of burning and a huge hole on the floor. Assia calls. A woman, her mother, takes us into a courtyard, concrete floor, a few plastic seats. A very little girl plays with a worn doll: "She is the daughter of my sister who is divorced, whispered Assia, my mother takes care of her". The father walks slowly, a dignified old gentleman, who was Lieutenant-general, companion of Abu Amar (Yasser Arafat). As an introduction he told me "The grandparents of my parents lived here, this is my land, I do not want to leave my country."

There were tears in his words, he spoke slowly. His mind wavers, vacillates. Yes, they saw falling from the sky papers, leaflets that told them to flee. They said that if they had members of the resistance near their houses they would be bombed, that they had to go away... Yes, they even got alert messages on their mobile phones! What technology! Yes, he managed to convince his family to take refuge in the UNRWA school. And he sat on the threshold of his house and saw the phosphoric bombs fall around him, they burnt everything they touched, but he did not move. He shouted to fleeing people in the street: "Stay, do not flee, it is your country". But nobody listened, smoke blinded everyone. And he, he stayed in his chair, said his wife. "Some residents returned for their animals, but I heard them saying "my cow died, my sheep also". Others paid boys to go feed the animals, because they were afraid to return home.

"For a long time, tells Zudhi Khilan, everything was burning in the street, we only saw dogs, so I started to extinguish a fire near the house, captured a goat that was lost and kept it in the yard, then I am again sitting in my chair. I heard the ambulance, but also the cries of women.

After F16s have bombed us, I saw helicopters arriving also to launch bombs. This is not a real war where enemies confront; it is a war where soldiers attack civilians, old men, women and children. There is no more room for Palestine and those who do not die, are terrified, but I am not afraid, I do not want to be afraid! "

The man became silent, he shook his head; the sound of bombs made him deaf, it looks like he is somewhere else, just somewhere else. We were there, drinking tea sitting in the sun, chasing flies that landed on a cake. The mother shows us how they lived, four families crammed in one room without water, without electricity. They had made some kind of oil stove for cooking: "We are modern, the others, they had to burn wood". Then, all together, we take the stairs to see the bomb that landed in the bed. We left it there, nobody lives any more on this floor with holes and covered with rubble, with no windows, as all the houses around, one cannot buy glass in Gaza.

And there, surreal and very real... an unmade bed, holes on the walls, very sharp shrapnels and this bomb lying in the bed a little, a bit silly, almost childish. "Fortunately, nobody was sleeping here!"

Assia said that her father was exhausted, she thinks he is about to cry, and when I ask this question that will be asked from each witness: "What would you say to people who will read this story?" Zudhi Khilani answered proudly: "Tell them I will never leave..."

## **IN THE CAR WITH FAYEZ**

Our next witness lives in Jabalya, just before Gaza. It took us several phone calls to set up a meeting. Fayez Nour Ahmed Salha is forty five years old. This man was a happy head of a family; his wife gave him seven children (three boys and four girls). Today, he only has one son and two daughters left. His wife and four of his children are dead, buried under the rubble of their house. We met him near his destroyed house. The interview goes on in the car as it is too hard for our witness to look at this place of misfortune. I must say that nothing is left that looks like a house, it is like if a giant hammer had crushed it. A pile of rubble, concrete slabs, scrap metal, a piece of chair, a plastic jar, fragments of clothing.

"The bombing happened in January 9 at 3:30 am, I was at work, at the UNRWA school, I am a keeper and I was taking care, at that time, of all those people who came seeking refuge in the school. We had to feed them, reassure them. Suddenly, a neighbor phoned to tell me: Your house has been bombed! "

Fayez looks at me carefully. He has small glasses, a few days beard. He is a short corpulent man; he needs silence between two sentences. "Then the neighbor told me to go straight to the hospital. That is where my family was. I left as quickly as possible and there, I recognized the remains of my wife and four of my children. My wife had no head, I could recognize her

clothes. It is Nour, my fourteen years old son, who got his mother and aunt out of rubble. He also helped me find pieces of the bodies of his brothers and sisters. Twelve people lived in the house, six were killed by the bombs. Some weapons' experts have come to study the rocket debris. I still do not understand why they kill innocent people. With all the technology available to Israeli soldiers, why have they not aimed at me, they just need, they say, our Jawal (mobile) to be able to track us? We have never had a weapon, and me, I only help others: all those who are afraid, those who suffer, I am not a fighter...

"Why my children and my wife?" I complained to a humanitarian organization, I want justice to be done to them. For two days, I could not go to see the destroyed house, I spent my time in the cemetery, I feel I have even lost my memory, I could not visualize the faces of my children. I needed to see their pictures to remember them. I now live in the house of my mother in law, also destroyed: the roof, it is just pieces of metal and nylon. My children, unfortunately, pass by the ruins on their way to school and they stay there for hours unless I go pick them up. Rasha, who is eight years old, sees her mother every night and wakes up crying. Roha, ten years, almost does not speak, she does not want to see anyone, she loses weight because she does not want to eat... and Nour, who is fourteen years old, I was told he has a problem with his hearing. I notice he does not listen, he is always in another world. As for me, I often need to be alone, I feel I am aggressive.

**“What can we expect?” He cries.**

"Live or die ... I do not care, I lost everything, I cannot imagine clearly my future. I just know that with or without help, I want to rebuild this house". Fayez has finally decided to come with us to the ruins to describe the scene. He is silent. Mechanically, I see him picking up a piece of cloth, and throwing it away.

## **NEAR JASMINS**

### **NEAR THE BORDER**

We left Fayez, to reach the place located most north in the Gaza Strip, near the border close to Israel. The road is strewn with destroyed buildings, including the famous American school completely bombed... We now walk along the sea! The Mediterranean is so beautiful, breathing from wave to wave, spraying scents of iodine in the branches of jasmine. The road is often bumpy; we must avoid large holes drilled by tanks. Nearby, one can see the roofs of factories, houses, in Israel. Assia was a little worried; she asked that we raise a white flag on the car. Yesterday, a vehicle had been pulverized. We are so paranoid that the driver confused the sound of watering pumps with the blades of a helicopter.

The man we want to meet is not easy to find, but soon, in a very quiet place with trees, lemon trees and jasmine, a very beautiful house, as if we were in Spain. An elegant gentleman, black

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leather jacket, walking stick, white hair and mustache just like Clark Gable, welcomes us. Abu Ziad El Ghoul, sixty-three, is a retired academic who has worked in finance. Today, he cultivates his land and especially after the first war, he was busy establishing coordination for international organisations. In fact, he negotiates with the Israelis to have passes, so that NGOs could come and go in the territory. Abu Ziad is clearly a diplomat. He lives near the border, mainly in a land populated by farmers who trade olives and lemons.

During the bombing, like many Palestinians, he has received text messages on his mobile phone to warn him, he was also called to see if there were resistance fighters nearby. Abu Ziad confirmed that no resistants were in the surrounding area: "I was very calm, I expected a ground offensive and suddenly, there was bombing, and the house of a cousin nearby was shelled. In this house, two people were killed, my cousin and his sixteen years old son. They had been warned that their house would be destroyed. I sent my son to see what happened, he took the jeep and when he arrived, the jeep was also bombed and my son was injured in the leg, he called me. He was very afraid that the Israelis would finish him off. As I speak Hebrew, I called by phone an Israeli official that I knew saying that I had to go help my son: "You have five minutes," he replied, very aggressive "...

**"But I need half an hour to bring my son and to take the dead!"**

The only advice he gave me then was to stay at home and close the door. Still, I managed to pull my son out of danger. He had a badly damaged leg. I realized that many people around the house were in a terrible state of stress.

"There were women, children, and many injured people. They did not dare to move for several days, they lived without water, without electricity, without food. I contacted the Red Crescent ambulances to come rescue them but the ambulances could not cross enemy lines, tanks blocked their path. I called the Israelis again, asking them to provide a bus to come evacuate them, all simple people, in vain. Finally I called a Haaretz reporter I knew well. This reporter alerted a humanitarian center and the Israelis called me back to ask what we needed. Two days later, there was a bus at the border with drugs and food and I went to pick them up, facing the military. I still do not understand why they bombed us, we live under their eyes/sight, a few meters away, they know who is here and what we do. We are a small community of one hundred eighty, totally harmless. They even killed dogs, donkeys and a camel!

"I have no problem with Jews as Jews, as normal citizens, but when they are colonizers, it is not possible that they do not ask themselves about what will happen to the colonized. The Jews have gone beyond their right; they have taken everything they wanted. Now they must ask themselves what else they want from us. With the Oslo accords, there was a good opportunity to make peace. "What to do?"

had written Lenin in his time. I dream of a country with two interdependent federations. The

Israelis, if they continue to do what they are doing, they will run into a wall and I hope they will wake up. On the other hand, we the Palestinians, who are simple people, we have more and more access to information and we must learn to talk freely and do like Emile Zola, "J'accuse! (I accuse)".

Before we leave Abu Ziad, we went to visit his son who lives in a house a little further away. All walls are tagged, as is done often by those who are returning from a pilgrimage to Mecca and who do not hesitate to paint their own house with welcoming words. His son was lying in a bed, shutters closed; the explosion also made him partly blind. Iron rods stick out from the plaster that surrounds his leg, he cannot talk to us.

## THE SILENT BEDOUIN

This time we left the seashore to find, in town, in Beit Lahiya, a Bedouin whose house was burned down. We park the car in a dirt road in the middle of a field of ruins surrounded by smaller buildings that all show strange scars. The sun beats down, no shade, a few tents and a few huts of metal plates and planks, and a woman who hides her face. She comes to get back her child playing on the ruins of war. She is a relative of the man whom we are supposed to meet for the story. She immediately said that he lost his mother, his wife and his three children, that they did not leave the house when the tanks came, because for Bedouins, it is not a good thing that women show up. She speaks quickly, a little embarrassed that we have surprised her, she wants to get some plastics to cover up the garden of her makeshift house. Ata Hermilat arrives, he hesitated to come to this place. Since the tragedy, he lives in a rented house far from here and, like many people who have been victims of the war he expects compensation (approximately 5 000 Euros), which should enable him to rebuild his house and to have a normal life again. Ata is thirty-one years old, he looks tired, and when I asked him what his work is, he says he does not have a job, and a long silence follows. We are in the midst of ruins; Ata Hermilat grabbed some stones to improvise a room where we can talk. He continues to look to the right, to the left, as if he was looking for something. He told us he had hesitated to come and that, if he had arrived at the last moment, it was because he could not wait for us in this place. It is difficult to understand exactly what happened. Ata Hermilat remained eight days in coma after the bombing.

"The first week of the war we went to live elsewhere. Then I came back to this house because it is our house. My children, my wife and my mother followed me, something I did not want! I sat on a chair in the garden and everyone was in the house when tanks fired. There was nothing left. I was lying on the ground after the bombing of the tanks; I could not see anything because of the dust, smoke and sand around me. And then I discovered that there was no house, and I looked for my family and I took them out of the rubble, in pieces: my son, my two daughters, my wife and my mother. After that, I fainted.

"When I woke up, after eight days in coma, I did not even want these memories to exist. I am

not only injured in my head but in my heart. Why my children? "Ata extends his arm pointing to the chaos, towards some fig trees. Flies are all around us, a stench is spreading in the heat, Ata rises, walks silently, his back bent, we will not know more.

## **FIVE MARTYRS**

This time, we are in Gaza City, looking for Anwar Khalil Baalousha. This man lives with the rest of his family in a rented apartment since his house no longer exists. The street where we go is very lively; ice cream and candies peddlers round up the crowd shouting "Halawayat, Halawayat"... Anwar notices us and leads us immediately to his house. This is a man of forty years; he speaks loudly and quickly, a handsome man built like an athlete. He takes us to the house and we sit in an empty room, on carpets. Two children cling to him and his wife, who all in black shows only her beautiful face. She has a cradle with a metal frame before her that she sways with her bare foot,. A swaddled baby sleeps. On the wall, a poster is pinned: five smiling faces, four smaller faces and, in the middle, the face of a young girl with a white veil. These are the five martyrs, the five girls of Samira and Anwar.

"We had a very modest house next to a mosque. This house was not very strong or very big; it had a tin roof. At the beginning of the war, we all went to live elsewhere but very soon, my eldest daughter and I wanted to return home. The third day of the war, we all returned home. That same afternoon, one of my daughters bought dates and distributed them to the neighbors telling them, that if we died, they should read the Quran for us. Here (in Gaza) we offer dates when there is a death in a family. My oldest daughter watched the news on television and when she saw that the police center was bombed, she said "they are lucky, they are martyrs!" We moved into our house and, as the electricity was interrupted, we thought we had one thing to do... go to bed. It was 10 pm and it is rare to go to bed so early... In total, we were ten persons as I have eight children. Samira, his wife (she is thirty-five) points towards the cradle where the youngest daughter sleeps and comments that she was thirteen days when the events happened, Bara was born by caesarean section. We went to sleep, four in one room and the six girls in the other - continues Anwar – the house is very small, it is only 45 m2 in total. About midnight, there was a bombing, I felt cold and the humidity entered my body, I wanted to pull the cover, but I felt that my arm was a bit stuck and I did not find the cover. Suddenly, I realized that the house had fallen on us, so I yelled at Samira who was sleeping... to wake up. We are dead I said - and he laughs, his wife too, but there is challenge in their laugh.

"We were very close to each other, a great pressure pushing us, we could not reach the baby's cradle. All the walls had collapsed and I will learn later that it was the roof of the bombed mosque that had fallen on us. The cold I felt was the water tanks that had exploded and emptied. For half an hour, with a free hand, I cleared the stones and the tin plates - his wife shows a photo she took with her Jawwal-. An hour later, only with our son Mohamed (18 months old), we got out of the rubble and we could get our baby. His cradle was overturned under the shock and, thanks to the fact that the cradle had a metal frame, the baby had not

been crushed by the stones. it is a miracle! Outside, the chaos, burning cars, and ambulances were waiting in the streets all around, I shouted to rescuers... Great God, come help us, people still down here! Then I fell unconscious."

Samira, at this point of the story, serves us fresh strawberrie juice. Often in the streets carts pulled by donkeys pass with loads of strawberries. Some people dare not eat them fearing that the substances released by the bombs have poisoned the crops. Anwar resumes his story. "At the hospital, when I woke up, I thought my six girls were dead, the doctors first told me one of our daughters had died then later, they told me only one had survived and that they could not rescue five of my children : Tahrir (eighteen), Ikram (fifteen), Samar (thirteen), Dina (eight years) and Jawad (four years). The one who survived is by a miracle! Iman (17 years old) woke up when the house collapsed, she then wanted to go to the toilet, but as she was stuck, she went back to sleep next to her sisters who had died. I can hardly understand how I can live with all this, I who cannot bear a simple needle sting! It is God who gives me strength and now I pray even while sleeping. "

Samira, with her big hands, makes a gesture, as if she would ask a question? Then she adds that her girls were very good at school, especially the eldest who could have continued her studies. The father concludes: "What is justice for Israelis? Why are my girls dead? They are innocent!" If we had to add an ending to the story of Anwar, it would be enough to add this pathetic anecdote: a prince of the UAE had seen on TV images of the ruins of Anwar's house, that were taken by a rescue team after the bombing. One could see, sticking out of the rubble, an arm and a hand waving to get freed. Moved, the prince sent 1 000 dollars to Anwar Khalil. Does horror have a price?

We left Anwar, Samira and their three children with this very depressing sense of powerlessness. I still have that postcard Samira gave me, you could see the five faces of her daughters; it is like a business card that would tell the possibility of happiness. We all went to lunch with a friend who is a doctor; he prepared Maqluba, an invigorating rice dish with beef. On our way to his house, south of the city, we walked along the seafront, fishermen struggling with tangled nets on the beach; everywhere we can see marks of tanks, and those big bulldozers that Israeli army uses to finish the job of bombs and tanks. We will finish our day with another doctor, Dr. Waleed (gynecologist) who does not mince his words: "You are psychologists, he says? Perfect, we are about one million five hundred thousand people in Gaza, that makes at least one million five hundred thousand cases for you. "Dr. Waleed reminds us that Gaza was longtime before a country where it was almost good to live in. This tall man, very graceful, who smokes slowly his cigarettes, says he is very pessimistic! "We cannot even dream any more, dream that our children could travel freely. We should first be able to make peace, including between ourselves. We live in a prison. Nobody can either enter or leave. The war came to break up what was left of our dignity, to put the fear deep inside!" It is late, Gaza empties out; lighting in the streets is reduced to its simplest expression. Here,

every one who can afford it, may have a generator, it is safer, provided they find gasoline! One can find gasoline in gas stations, but also at roadside, in plastic bottles.

I slept, stunned, exhausted, up to 5:18 am - when the muezzin chants the call to prayer, which triggers the concert of all the roosters in the backyards of houses close to my window. Light sea mist, it is almost cool, Assia and Aouni, the driver, wait for me. For Marie-Laure and Regis, there is still time to grapple with the owner from whom they will rent the future clinic in Khan Yunis, I learned two words in Arabic: masbout (it is good) and Boukra (tomorrow). I ask Assia about the use of the rosary that Aouni continuously manipulates. She explains that they must say thirty-three times this prayer: "God, erase my sins... And gives an example: "If, on Friday, we feel hate, it is not right, God should erase this sin." Somewhat mischievously, I asked her:

**"But what then do you do with the Israelis; it is a sin to hate them?"**

**"No, the Israelis, it is not the same, they are enemies!"**

## **ESCAPE DEATH IS IMPOSSIBLE**

Today our mission takes us from Jabalya to Gaza City. And our first meeting is a very respectable gentleman who is responsible for the security of an entire neighborhood. In the taxi, Aouni listens Feirouz. The area where we go is destroyed in its majority; many flattened houses, gutted buildings and riddled facades. Our man lives on a hill, his house was not too damaged, it served as barracks for the Israeli army! A chance, if we can say... Only one or two phosphoric bombs burned partly a floor... Abu Tamer Ahmed Saadi Abed Rabo, fifty-three, is a shopkeeper, but he is also responsible for the UNRWA emergency service. Saadi smokes too much, obviously, and drinks tea. He welcomes us outside on a terrace a little broken up in front of UNICEF tents, gray tents that come from France to shelter the homeless. I noticed his white moccasins, small glasses. Saadi speaks calmly.

"We felt that this was not a normal war... Air strikes were terrible (we could count a bomb every twelve seconds) and we were all forced to live in one room, with water supplies, because we had nothing, except fear. Here, we were twenty-seven people, some using the caps of plastic bottles as a measure to ration water. The more the time passed, the more some of us said we preferred to die here, at that very moment, indoors. I saw many people close their eyes and wait for the bomb that would kill them. No one dared move, we had to crawl to the toilet. During the night, bombs lit the scene as if it were the middle of the day a kilometer around. Each time a bomb exploded we thought it was for us, we did not cry, we were stunned, shocked. As head of the family, I saw children waste away and I wondered how I would respond if a bomb fell here. I wanted, if that happened, that we die immediately and all together, I did not want to see my children bleed.

"When there was nothing left to eat, I told my son: We must leave this place... And my son answered: No one can flee death. Children hid in all possible places: under the table, in closets. When we thought that a ground offensive was imminent, we were convinced that we had to light candles so that the Israelis know we were here, that there were people still alive inside and they should not fire. After that night of waiting, we did not know what to do, two hours passed in calm and then the Israelis arrived. Through loudspeakers, we were ordered to leave. Outside, we realized that everything was destroyed, houses around no longer existed. We, we could see tanks with their guns turning very quickly and aiming at us.

"They told us: You walk straight, look down or else, the one who looks up, is dead. We had to go down inside the bomb craters, sometimes deep, and up to the other side, with the injured. It was very difficult. After a hundred meters, we saw many soldiers. Walking along the houses, we saw corpses, I recognized my cousin, we also saw hands sticking out of the rubble! Men and women had to walk in two separate lines and young people had to lower their pants to the ankles to see if they are not wearing bomb belts around the abdomen. My son is right; it is very difficult to flee death. Soldiers captured some of us, and they left the others go toward the city. That is what I experienced.

"Before, my house was a paradise, there was a very green garden, now I see it as a cemetery. I am relieved only when I am outside the walls. I cannot sleep and when something falls, I hear a bomb. We dare not turn off the lights, we are so afraid to remain in the dark. I do not want the night to come. "

## **PAST A SIMPLE FARM**

It did not take us long to reach the Farm where Ahmad Fathi Abed was waiting for us. A few hundred meters, the time to pass by a destroyed pottery factory and here we are at work. We cannot call it a farm since the house is a hut of wood and scrap material where a harness and some farming tools hang. A fire burns in a fireplace of metal plate, the soil is clay, and a shellbed serves as chair.

Ahmed is forty years old, very green eyes, weathered skin like a mountaineer. Before the war, there were cows, he used to sell milk and meat; before the war ... We are sitting on wooden boxes. Curious people and friends came to hear the story of Ahmad, his brother Mahmoud is also there. Ahmed remembers: "When the tanks came, we were locked in the house for seven days, without sleeping, with crying children. We all went out with white flags, children and women walked first, and I saw with my own eyes that there were tanks targeting the farm. It was January 4. They killed all the cows and camels. Then they pointed the guns at us, we lied down and we cried. Only my father, my mother, my aunt (actually the second wife called my aunt – editors' note) and a brother did not come out, they did not want to leave the farm. We walked for hours. Some were injured on their backs. We phoned regularly to my father who explained that the soldiers had destroyed the houses around. On January 11 at 9 am, the

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soldiers made them leave the farm, they first settled on a mound and my father shut off his mobile phone. Mahmoud, the son, managed to escape while my parents continued walking on with white flags. It is not until the next day that we found out they had been killed on the road and that even the UNRWA ambulance could not pick up the corpses. They stayed several days unburied. Now, I have no family, no home, no more animals, no more work, I am lost. Even teachers say that my children need a psychologist, they cannot learn any more, and myself, I cannot sleep. "

Ahmed Fathi stops, pulls blister packs out of his shirt pocket and then he continues: "I sleep here in this cabin and I want everyone to know what is happening, I mean, Mr. Moshe Dayan was wrong when he said that Mr. Barak was a great general. A great general does not tell his soldiers to kill civilians". The tone rises in the small smoky room and one of the men, (Omae Salaa, thirty-five) who has injuries on his back, said that he spoke with the soldiers, asking them to let him pass as a cease-fire had been declared. One soldier asked him to shut his mouth and remove his pants (again to verify that the man does not have explosives around his abdomen - editor's note) ... Then the soldier asked me why the man I was carrying was hurt. I said he was in the farm that had been bombed and that, by chance, the cows protected him. The soldier looked surprised; then let us move forward. Fortunately, we are alive! "

Then we left the farm, and Ahmed Fathi came with us for a few tens of meters until the place where the dead bodies of his family remained for several days. A horse was waiting on the roadside, a lame horse that took two bullets in the leg.

## **A SMALL SHOP IN JABALIA**

Mahmoud Jawad Fajaj Abed Rabo, forty-five, he wears a little cap, a sort of jacket. His brother Adnan Jawad Fajaj Abed Rabo, is next to him, he was a policeman in the Palestinian Authority. We have first met them in the terrace of a small store where the tragedy happened: a bomb killed eight people who were out of their house. We are sitting in a room upstairs, the two men speak with difficulty.

They remember that during the bombing (they talk about phosphoric bombs) the whole family, fifteen people had assembled on the ground floor. Then, when the shelling stopped, they decided to leave, especially since a cease-fire was announced. And it is precisely at this moment that the drama took place. Adnan, whose breathing is hard, said: "I saw a drone, here we call it the zanzana because the noise they make in the sky is like a mosquito (an unmanned aircraft). And I saw the drone firing a missile, it touched us all, fifteen people, and eight people died. I saw a mother and her son falling in the arms of one another. There was blood everywhere and smoke and people screaming. We tried to organize rescue but ambulances were not allowed to come to the area, so we used donkey carts to transport the dead and injured.

"I still have debris of bombs in the bones, and I know that someone carried me on his back for one kilometer. I remember I saw dead bodies in the street, I fear to remember those moments. "The other brother, injured in the back, in the hands and in his face, explains that some people picked him up and carried him in a blanket which made worse his injuries. He adds: "We must tell the world that we want to live in peace and that soldiers should not come back. They killed our sons, a big part of my family is gone, what else to say? We just wanted to save it all. Yesterday, I went to the doctor for my injuries, he said after examining me: You would need a psychologist... But I wondered what can I say to a psychologist? "I am shy but I am not crazy!"

Drinking once more some tea, this time flavored with maramiya (a kind of sage), we talked about a lighter topic, that people love to discuss Gaza with the French: Jacques Chirac, Gazans absolute hero! And by way of goodbye, Mahmoud throws me, a little sarcastically: "Why you do not take all Palestinians to France... are you afraid of being reduced to ashes? "

## **TEARS OF ZENAT**

The family Samouni is something of a celebrity in the museum of horrors of Gaza. More than twenty people were killed on the threshold of this big house that bears the scars of war: burns, shrapnel, and also some graffiti drawn by Israeli soldiers on how all-the-Arabs-will-die or this drawing of a bomb with tow dates: Arabs 1949-2009... or here-is-your-cemetery-will-kill-you-all. The house is strangely standing in this little street where all the others are mere piles of concrete. The room we enter is absolute sadness, gray and dirty concrete walls and just this large photo that shows the Samouni's family twenty-one martyrs. Women are not portrayed, instead of their faces, a white flower.

Zenat Abedallah Samouni, our host, sits on a chair, she holds her baby in her arms. Veiled in black, her face shows fatigue, dark circles, weariness, a terrible sadness... Zenat, thirty-five, is now a widow and had eight children, seven left: "During the bombing, we were together in this house, we were ninety seven people".

"After the bombing, soldiers arrived, they were frightening. They were very young with face paint. They asked who was the head of the house, my husband came out and they shot him, then returned to the room, they broke everything and threw grenades into the room, then they shot at us, many were injured, including my four year old son who was shoot twice, we were screaming: Help, rescue us! I watched my husband on the threshold of the door, he stopped moving and the blood came out from everywhere. I tried to speak in Hebrew and asked: Is my husband dead? Then I wanted to go out and get him, I was barefoot and one soldier shouted at me: Let him or I kill you! So I told him, looking him straight in the eyes: Why did you kill my husband?"

"He aims his weapon, his face was terrible and I thought he would kill me. The soldiers grouped us and ordered us to go south. We could see them on the roofs, where they targeted us. They told the boys to remove their pants; then we walked to the house of a cousin where I hid with my child, groaning and having trouble breathing. The ambulance could not reach us. I saw that his mouth was dry but he could not drink, so I dipped my finger in water and I tried to cool him. He was bleeding a lot and at one point, he bit my hand very heavily, I said: "Do what you want to your mum".

At this point of the story, I must describe the scene: we are four or five in the room. A photographer came and took photographs of the graffiti on the walls. Zenat is so moved by her story that tears run from her eyes as Assia translated and could barely contain her grief. Zenat presses her baby, wipes away her tears and resumes.

"My son bit me so hard that I could not bear the pain, I told him: my finger is too sore. Then he has bitten hard the blanket. Then he told me: "Mommy I'll take you with me to paradise. He wanted to read the Koran and sing a children's song, then he paused, and then he became cold and died. Today, I fear for my other children. I do not know how I am going to live because my husband was like a roof, he protected me. And now? When the children hear a noise, they are afraid. I do not know what is going to happen to us. "

## **A MISSILE FAR AWAY**

We did not leave unscathed after meeting with Zenat. Even if I try not to be moved, I am cruelly shaken when I find the sun illuminating the ruins. Another woman handed me a scarf with dried blood: "This is what remains of the child". We go through fields and ruins on foot. A strong odor of gas still lingers, and all around, remains of bombs that we avoid touching, certain pieces spit flames when they are struck. We must be careful where we walk; there is no question that our clothes or our shoes bear traces of powder! We have some tight controls to pass before returning to the plane for France. Our steps lead us to a group of women and children on a small terrace. One of them kindles a small fire with few branches on a metal tray and makes tea with mint. In front of us, stands Nasra Hadji who is sixty years, Hafaf Fawaz Hadji, thirty-nine years and six children. Two of them were injured during the war and the eldest, injured in the spinal column, is treated in Turkey. Hafaf unfortunately cannot read the medical reports sent from Turkey. "We were about thirty in the house, and we stayed a whole week without moving when the air raid started. We had been warned by mobile phone messages that we would be bombed. We then were joined by neighbors whose homes had been bombed and had many injured and dead. Then, during the ground offensive, when the soldiers arrived, they entered here, they stripped the boys, blindfolded their eyes and tied their hands, and we were all locked in a room throughout the night until noon the next day. They used the house as barracks; they have even removed all the tiles to take the sand they used to fill bags for protection".

As she tells this story, we were interrupted by a thud. It must be a Qassam missile fired at Israel... Arabic missiles, whispers Hafaf without showing emotion at the column of smoke that dissolved in the sky. She is more worried when we hear, shortly after, the whispering of the drones, even if this strange noise is part of everyday life.

"After that night, the soldiers told us to walk towards Rafah to the south. We were scared and we did not really know how far we could go. The soldiers later told us to go home, what to do? We split, some headed to Rafah and others went into nearby houses. My son, injured in the back, could not move, he was in the house of a cousin and he called for help. Around him, the injured died after hours of bleeding. When things became calmer, the ambulance arrived but could not approach the house, we had to load the dead and injured on carts and drag them ourselves about two kilometers; we had no more donkeys. We had to leave dead people on the road; we did not have enough strength to take them! We were able to recover the bodies only two weeks later; by then we could not even recognize them.

"Hafaf adjusted her red scarf, she would hope, she would simply expect to live in her country safely. Since the war, she constantly listens to the radio. She is attentive to all the news, fearing that war will resume, a simple dream. Before leaving, we visited her house, everything is destroyed, the furniture (what remains) are crushed, they served as target and the soldiers here, too, have written across the walls, but Hafaf does not know what they wrote. For now, she does not have the courage or the means to work. She just lives in her chaos, one day at a time.

When night finally fell, I was happy to find my friends, eat, laugh with them and try to talk about other things... But how? We've tasted knafeh, a very sweet cake, but in my mouth, I had strange tastes. And then faces whose eyes were mixed. All these people told me stories, their stories, what do they share beyond the suffering? Yes, this last day of March in Gaza, I saw what it was like to pretend ... believe that life can be beautiful.

## **APRIL 1st.**

Wednesday, April 1st. Jamal is really not a regular character, he told us at breakfast that Israeli frogmen invaded Gaza coasts... We forgot that we were on April 1<sup>st</sup>, not bad Jamal!

Today, Dr. Marie is with us, and this reassures me, I feel an overflow, an overflow of corpses, an overflow of distress. Being with more people, I say that it will dilute the horror. We begin our visits in Gaza City, in a small apartment where Sabah Rashad Abu Aisha lives, a woman

of forty-four. A child in the street takes us to her home. When Assia knocks the door, she heard a woman whisper: "If men, do not let them enter." We finally entered, Sabah is covered with a black veil, it is early in the morning and obviously she is a little embarrassed because she just finished washing. It is good that Assia and Marie are with us. "The bombings lasted ten days, says Sabah and we were so afraid that we all decided to live with an aunt in a house that seemed more secure. My husband Amar Rezek Abu Aisha, who is a mason, has also a second wife, Nahil Khaled Abu Aisha who gave him three children, I have had a son after seventeen years of marriage. That night, I went with my son to sleep at a friends' house and, unfortunately, at one o'clock, several bombs hit the house where my husband was. A neighbor came to announce the death of my family, only one of the girls survived."

"I have a sister who is alive!" Said Ahmed, her little boy who came to join in the conversation. He played with a plastic tank and Sabah asked him to give us dates. When he is out, she explains that Ahmed is not very normal, he refuses to go outside and wakes up constantly, he also has enuresis and he does not play with other children. Mary reassures her, but what else can she do? "God has more power than the soldiers" states Sabah.

## **AMONG THE FIELDS OF CABBAGE**

We left Gaza towards the road to the border, east, toward Israel, to join the sector of Johar Addeik. We pass next to a large cement plant completely destroyed. "F'tou, f'tou" Assia is toting a rifle in imagination, and she adds: "it looks like the soldiers, they were playing video games. And it is true that we see buildings that have been shot so playfully! It is so absurd. There is something systematic, mechanical in the destruction. We are entering a very rural area, in the distance, a line of trees... Israel, a white balloon floats up in the sky a hundred meters high. Here, there are informal settlements and many isolated houses were destroyed. A shepherd keeps sheep near a fig tree, he explains that most of his animals were killed by soldiers, and he adds for Dr. Mary "I'm not married!"

The person whom we should meet is difficult to locate. We must pass through an encampment of Bedouins living in the midst of a bric a brac of metal sheet, scrap wood and concrete. We finally arrive to a villa in a secluded spot where, under a tree we are supposed to meet three brothers: Karim Saleh Abu Hajaj Ahd (thirty years), Youssef (thirty-five years) and Majhid (forty-six). They all had sad faces, devoid of the spark in the eye that often farmers worldwide have. Our story is insane, Youssef said: "We were all together in a house when the shelling intensified, there were houses in the neighborhood that had been destroyed, but we thought ours was safer. With the neighbors, we were twenty-seven people living on the ground floor, there were a total of seventeen children, and the older was thirteen years old. When the ground offensive began, the soldiers called people by radio: Get out of your home with white flags and head to the cities. We also received leaflets dropped by helicopter on which we were told the same thing. We had decided to escape together with white flags, putting women and children before men to show that we were not combatants, we were not dangerous..."

"The whole group walked in that direction (he points towards a square of cabbage in bloom), the children were very frightened, they cried and waved large flags We could clearly see the tanks and soldiers. Suddenly, a tank rotated its turret and fired on the group. My sister, holding a flag, fell at the first shot, then my mother was also shot, walked a few feet and collapsed, she was heard shouting God is great."

"As the soldiers continued firing, the whole group returned to the house, leaving the two dead women. The next day, the tanks destroyed the house next door, the detonations were very violent, so people thought they preferred to die out rather than confined. We went out and we could see planes flying over Gaza, so we walked in the opposite direction to the house of a friend. From there, we tried to coordinate with the soldiers to recover the two bodies; we managed to reach an Israeli humanitarian organization and also a member of the Knesset. The soldiers were forced to deal with this business, they said by telephone that they saw only one body, and then they no longer wanted to talk. It took sixteen days before the soldiers withdrew, and we could return home. The mother was found easily enough but the daughter, she was held under a zinc plate and the tanks had run over her. It took us four hours to find all the parts of her body. Thank God, they are now buried. Why do they kill us? What danger do we represent? They see that we cannot fight back. We just want to live in our house, live in peace and security. My mother lived there for twenty-five years and she loved this house. If we can, we shall try to rebuild it, we were given \$ 5 000 to do so! "

Youssef takes us to visit this famous house; the soldiers have lived there for several days, since then, nothing has changed. There are no windows, and in the kitchen, where everything is broken, dozens of loaves of bread and other supplies are rotting on the ground. Everywhere, bullets in the walls and this amazing graffiti in English: Have you ever seen how hell looks like? Well, it's just around you... ha-ha-ha! And the signature is a drawing of a sort of a little monster of a video game. When we descended, Youssef said again: "I do not think of the future, God will decide."

## **DONKEY OF SAHER**

We follow a road, once more with its trail of destroyed houses, towards Al Mughraqa. On one of the ruins, which supported half of the roof slab, flies a green flag, three boys are waiting for us, sitting on pieces of concrete. Our young man, Saher Ata Azzam, confirmed his age, the other two are his friends; one of them is handicapped, he walks with a cane, a large head on a tiny body. Saher is not married, he is studying for a bachelor degree and he recounts his sadness: "When the bombing became very intense, my father came out and saw the tanks and the soldiers in the field opposite the house. He returned, and no sooner had he arrived when bombs hit the house upstairs. We then all descended to the ground floor, we filled all the pots and pans of water to keep as long as possible and soon felt that the upper house was destroyed. We stayed three days without moving. The fourth day, my father took the truck to

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go and get water, I wanted to go with him, but he said it was dangerous and that I should stay with the family.

"We stood on the threshold of the house with my two brothers, one thirteen and the other a year and a half. I turned, there was an explosion and I felt something strange, in fact, I saw before my eyes half of the body of my father. My little brother was, too, completely broken and my other brother had something strange in the head. I yelled: Dad has died, my little brother too, and Mohamed, I do not know what has happened to him. I thought he had run away, so I took my brothers and sisters, I made them to close their eyes so they did not see the dead and we went to hide in a zinc hut, a little further. I could call an ambulance: Come quickly, we have martyrs, but they could not come to us, we were in an area where the soldiers refused to let the ambulance pass. So I decided to go and pick up the remains of the body of my brother, cut into thirteen pieces. As for my big brother, a bullet had pierced his skull and his brain was sitting next to him!

"I needed a vehicle to transport them. I joined my family and the next day I went to rent a car to take my mother, my grandmother, my brothers and sisters to the UNRWA school. Then I tried to return home with the car but the tanks were too close. I had the idea to take a cart with a donkey, thinking they would let me pass. I managed to cross the barrier and load the bodies on the cart but when I left, they started to shoot at me, so I threw myself into the ditch beside the road, I have crawled and the donkey followed me. We just reached the ambulances, the donkey died before the car, he was shot several times.

"Well, now we live in an apartment in Gaza, I think I'm going to stop school because I have to work to support the family because we had not finished paying for the house that is in ruins now. I would like to have my driving license to work as a driver. I stay with my family in the night, but during the day, I always come here. The blood of my father and my brothers is on the walls, it's my place here, where can I go? I fear for my family, my mother is pregnant, what will we tell the child when he asks where his father is? We all have nightmares and it is true that if one day I had the opportunity, I would not hesitate to take my revenge. I want to say to all those who do not know what is happening here: Come see the truth, come see how children are treated in Gaza! "

A fellow of Saher challenges us: "You want to see the blood on the walls?" We decline the invitation; in fact we are standing KO. I look at Marie-Laure, yes; she would take a little distance, breathing for a few minutes. Dining? It seems difficult; perhaps we should go to this amusement park that we see a little further with a small Ferris wheel that rotates among the laughter of children... Maybe?

## A CRATER IN THE GARDEN

Aouni warms up his car, we drive through a landscape where large greenhouses stand; they are not covered, only the steel structures rise above the cornfields. We are in Deir Al Balah, about the center of the Gaza Strip. The house where we go is surrounded by fields, there are in these fields holes caused by the monstrous strikes of F16s, yellow craters in a carpet of greenery. An entire family welcomed us into a garden, sheltered by a tin shed; we take the cushions so that we can sit comfortably. Flowers around us, beautiful smell of jasmine, we hear goats and chickens, the countryside, all very normal. We also heard muffled rumblings: the thunder? "No, just fire!" said, almost smiling, Awad Ayech Al Smeri, farmer nearby Deir El Balah, fifty-three.

Awad received us with women, children and other men. The hot tea, flavored with fresh plants. Beside him, his wife Amna, Tamam, his sister who wears a white veil and Rabah Awad, a cousin whose house was destroyed, all speak at the same time, all want to say how the F16 bombed them. They remember that initially, the mother was outside near the clay oven for baking bread. She lit the wood, there was smoke! Is it the smoke that has attracted drones? And in their wake, large bombers? They believe... One of their neighbors was harvesting peas when he heard a very loud explosion. In the house, a son, Ahmed, saw all the windows shattered, he still bears the traces on the scalp. They bring him to us, so that we see, so that we believe, pieces of bombs that children handle with a certain pride and leave on the sand...

"Such bombs, says Awad, are not phosphorous bombs, they first give off great white smoke and then they explode in the sky, we have received many, when they fall from the F16 aircraft, they cause very large damage to the land. We wondered what to do, whether to leave or to stay. And then we were told the story of this tragedy that was a sign for us: a certain Mahmoud was with his wife and their baby at home, a bomb fell on them, the father died, the mother too, but what is incredible is that she has been cut in two halves and the whole upper part of her body was thrown in the air, but in her arms, she held her baby... It had almost nothing, just some minor injuries! Then we thought we must go away from this place, we put the children on donkeys, took some blankets and we fled to the UNRWA school, they would not bomb a school? When we walked, we were certain we would die, drones were flying over us and people told us that an F16, so high it may be, may aim at a person walking on a path. We saw helicopters and tanks coming to our houses, we naively thought they would not bomb them because they were empty. In fact, they have destroyed many. We walked for eight kilometers to the school. The door was closed and the school was empty, we moved in as we could and we stayed two weeks! The mother, each day, she returned to the farm to care for animals. Now, we have almost nothing left, the goat has given birth but it is sick, I think it will die. We have always lived in fear, even before the withdrawal (the departure of Israeli

settlers in 2005, editor's note) we were completely surrounded; we could neither enter nor leave, outside of specific hours.

"Now what? On one side, there is the sea and, on the other, the army. I feel that the war could start at any minute, it's our destiny. We cannot afford to leave here, our grandparents lived here, and the grandparents of our grandparents – Awad also looks at the road, and starts to laugh – we were even there before the war! "One of the women of the house speaks about the children: "I do not know what to do, children are glued to their mother all day, at night, they wake up screaming. It must be said anywhere that we are normal citizens, we want to live in peace. Our son, I wish he becomes a doctor... and our daughter, she wants to be an architect. And he (she shows one of the boys), he was very lucky because he went in 1999 to France to dance folk dances! "After tea, one of the children gave us a bird cage, and then everybody told us how it was important that we listen and take their messages. The family wanted to give us land for our proposed clinic and we had to visit the crater of the F16. In the car, returning with Dr. Mary, we exchanged our impressions. We were dealing with people, extremely simple, their story was interspersed with evidences (bombs, craters) as if they thought otherwise it could not be believed. As if that their suffering should not scare us too much, enough to abandon them. Yes, we met people in fear of abandonment....

## **A CURIOUS EVE**

The reward for us - if we dare say so, in fact, one should speak of half-time - was to go to Jamal who had prepared chicken and vegetables. I had a compulsive hunger and the constant presence of cigarette smoke began to irritate my throat. Another witness of the war, came to distract me from this neurotic attachment, it will be the only unnamed witness in this book for his own reasons, which are very legitimate. Free speech is not always appropriate in a land of war... Like many Gazans, our friend had the reflex from the first bombing, to gather his family, uncles, cousins, and sisters: the reunification of the family in one single place is a normal pattern in Gaza. As if it was less vulnerable when we were together and above all, as if fear could dilute with a larger number of people around.

Ahmed - let's call him so - was surprised the first night when his daughter said these words: "Dad, I'm scared!"... "It was the first time my two years daughter employed the word of scare! The first days of the war, I have not stopped going to work, the town was not normal. There were few people in the streets, most went to funerals and it was very difficult to find taxis: they did not want to go in some places, like crossing a bridge for example. When the bombing became more intense, my brother, his wife and children, came to our house. We all lived in one room, often without electricity, and we ate canned food.

"But before that time, I especially remember the night of December 31, we watched TV all night and we could see how everyone was joyful making wishes for a happy new year around

the world and they were all celebrating. We, we thought we were going to die, we were no longer having parties for years, so we wished each other a good year and good health, and I feel there was as much humor as sarcasm in these strange wishes. About January 3, I took the way to work, everywhere, there were rumors about a ground offensive; both fear and expectation could be read on the faces... Will it ever end! January 4, bombing had flared up and I told my daughter that it was bursting balloons. When we had no electricity and we could not watch TV, we listened to news on our mobile phones. We did not know if they would arrive by sea or by road, with tanks.

"To relieve stress, I remember eating guavas with my daughter. I felt that the war could be very violent. Then I read, I looked for a history book about Beirut in the eighteenth century. The next morning, I'm not going to work, it costs me a lot but there were no telephones and many people were absent. The same evening, my brother asked me to come home because their home was very safe, one thing surprised me: my brother is usually unshaven, and there he had his face smooth, one would say a snowman...

At 3 o'clock, three bombs at once fell in the very safe neighborhood of my brother. Their house was filled with dirt after the bombing and we saw flames coming out. So they, my brother, his wife and their three children, very shocked, came with us. Then we spent most of our time, all grouped in the bedroom which was the most protected spot of the house. We read, we played with the children to reassure them. We felt that there would be a massacre but strangely, I was not scared more than that. For years, we have no choice, we are exposed to violence. The third day of the ground attack, my other brother moved to the house, five more people, five more mouths to feed. We had to make bread with the means at hand. Apart from these culinary considerations... we also talked a lot about politics.

### **"What future for Gaza?"**

We see less and hope, less light, sometimes you wonder who the real enemy is. I belong to this category of people who asks the question of leaving the country, but the question does not arise as long as, in these circumstances, nothing is possible. We do not live a traditional occupation ... we are faced with brutality and stupidity. "

### **VOYAGES**

### **VOYAGES**

That same evening, Regis was very shocked while passing in front of the Al Quds hospital, where he had worked during the war. He just discovered the extent of the damage and numerous bullet holes near the windows of his room - we have been invited to Imad's house. Imad is a Palestinian who works for the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) and had a few years ago a small business of breast implants! We owe to Imad to have revealed the martyr of the family Samouni. While we drink tea and coffee, eat pastries in a

room with a real fireplace, Imad cannot help mentioning this moment when he discovered bodies, twenty-one corpses mostly women and children....

"I saw everything in Gaza, but never such violence. I called all human rights associations and the reporters I know, this is not possible. There is no justice in this world. I kept in my memory the smell of the bodies and, several days later in my bathroom, I still felt the horror. Gaza could be great, it is full of friendly people, there is the sea, the sun: this could be a paradise! My dream now is to be able to go to New Zealand, a green and quiet country. Gazans have dreams like everyone else: to live in peace, to have a car, travel, have a house, a job, be sure children are safe. I am afraid that these dreams remain dreams and we must not forget that when parents are worried, children are too. "

On TV, we hear at this time a cover of Desirless song (voyage, voyage, ...), a song in which the singer, with a terribly Freudian name, announced:

**Travel, Travel  
Do not stop  
Above the barbed wire  
Hearts bombarded  
Look at the ocean ...**

I cannot say I had a very good night. At breakfast with my doctors, I remembered my crazy-nervous laugh when referring to the gallery of the torments of the previous day. For this last mission in Gaza, we would drive south, to the Egyptian border where we were stuck a few weeks before, but this time at the right side, if one can say so. Dr. Marie is still with us. The trip begins by a long road in the seaside. Gaza Strip, remember, is a strip of land forty kilometers long by fifteen wide, along the Mediterranean. Apart from the war, we find, mainly for export, strawberries, carnations, cherry tomatoes and pickles!

## **FLOWERS ON THE BOMB**

Our first meeting was held with a gentleman who lives near Khan Younes, Majid Fathi Naja, 45 years. He is a former employee of the Palestinian Authority. Majid has four children (two boys and two girls) and his house was built just 300 meters from the Palestinian border. He welcomes us into the courtyard of a garden in which grow some fine fig trees.

"On January 3, the Israelis bombed our area, there was so much smoke that we could not stay. Then they threw leaflets from an aircraft telling us to leave our homes as quickly as possible. With my wife and children, we left without taking anything and we came into this house.

"On 10 January, at about 10 pm, the Israelis threw phosphorus bombs. We were about twenty civilians in the house, and I went out with some adults to extinguish fires that broke out

everywhere, we also found two old people living alone in their house. At the same time, there was another round of bombing, but this time it was very heavy bombs. One of them entered right inside the house. It went through the roof and walls and unfortunately it hit my wife right in the chest. I went into the house, my wife lost all her blood and she died before I could do anything. There were also injured children, another woman who had a large wound in the eye, and an old lady who had a broken skull. We were able to move everyone in an ambulance and, at the hospital, even the doctors were afraid because the faces of the injured were covered with sand and they thought it was phosphorus. I want to complain because we cannot accept that ordinary people should be victimized and we remain silent. I have no home, I lost my wife and my children. I no longer want to work at the school. I was proud of them, now they are always afraid, they have headaches and cannot concentrate. I have to rebuild life". He shows a young woman in black who sat while we were talking: "She wants to marry me, she was also injured. They removed something off her eye. You know, I know what suffering is, I spent time in Israeli prisons, and my wife had waited eight years... All this to finally be crushed by a bomb"!

We visit the house with him on the spot where the bomb had fallen. There is rubble, traces of blood, and some plastic flowers lying on the ground. You can follow the path of the bomb that has ruptured the walls and the roof, nothing has been cleaned. Majid, before we leave, said: "We must fight to have laws that proscribe bombing civilians. We just want that peace will dominate the world. Why is it so difficult to live in peace with the Israelis? "

An old man with a cane came up to me, he invoked Allah, then he cried and collapsed in my arms. And it makes me infinitely sad. I want to say something but I have no words, I clasped him in my arms as if he were my own grandfather.

## **A WHITE FLAG TO DIE**

We arrived at the place of Nora Ibrahim Najjar, a small house in the midst of the rubble from destroyed houses, few hundred meters from the border. Nora wants to talk to us but refused that we take a picture of her and we duly noted. A family member and neighbor Rahed Najjar, is also present to tell of the adventures people have gone through living on the edge of the territory. Nora is a second wife; she is thirty-three years old and has two children. She wears a checkered veil and a red dress; she also takes care of the daughter of the first wife. We are in a tiny room furnished sparsely. There are not enough chairs for sitting. Two children very turbulent and noisy make the space even tighter.

"On January 11, at 10 pm, the Israelis threw phosphorus bombs in the area. We spent time to extinguish the fire, then we went to bed when the bombardment ceased. At 5 am, neighbors knocked on the door saying: be aware, you must go out and climb onto the roof with white flags. They are crushing the houses with tanks and bulldozers. We all went out, and soldiers, through loudspeakers, ordered us to leave the house and head towards the city center. We saw

them enter houses through holes made by the bulldozers, and we were very afraid because they approached us. We thought it was necessary to gather everybody and move forward, women and children first, with white flags: the soldiers would certainly have compassion? The first wife had returned, not long ago, from the pilgrimage to Mecca. She had a lot of scarves and white clothing. We cut them to make flags with broomsticks. Then we left, she points towards the window the area where they had moved on, and we most have been fifty people. The soldiers then fired from the house opposite and my aunt dropped dead. In a panic everyone threw themselves to the floor. The soldiers then told us not to move, that otherwise they would kill us all. It was horrible, we were a few meters from the body of the woman and her daughter of fourteen cried; she wanted to come up to her mother. When things calmed down, when the tanks had finished crushing the houses, we could take the children away to a school. They bombed later but there were no injuries. We do not only have injuries on our body, we have injuries on the soul! "

This time, Rahed, thirty-five years, speaks, this former officer of the Palestinian Authority, lives close by in a house apparently wonderful, as the facade does not give to the border. Indeed, bombs completely destroyed the side of his house facing east; inside, several walls and furniture are riddled with bullets. In the bedroom, the headboard of the bed has shattered, but fortunately, that day, no one was sleeping there. "Most Palestinians love to live in peace! It must be said all over the world, insists Rahed. We would like to see our children play something other than war. We all fear reliving what happened, we need everyone to mobilize to stop the war". When Marie-Laure leans to take some pictures of the border by the kitchen window, Rahed takes her away from it: "Be careful, soldiers can shoot. We have no right to take pictures here! "

## **IN THE LAND OF TUNNELS**

The more we advance to the South, the more the towns seem poor; however, in Khan Yunis as well as in Rafah, where we arrive, one can see the markets or shops that are full of stuffs. Aouni warns: "These are all things that pass through the famous tunnels". And he wants to take us to see how it looks.

This time we are only a few meters away from the Egyptian border, close to that accursed terminal where we had to hang around for days on few weeks before. It is enough to pass a barrier of houses and small buildings that lead to a strip filled with tents, real tents but also simple plastic sheets stretched over wooden poles. Everywhere, young boys with wheelbarrows full of sand and everywhere the purring engine winches and generators that send air into the tunnel. Aouni looking for a tunnel worker he knows so that we can visit the facilities. What amazes us first is quantity of tunnels: hundreds!

When we finally enter one of these tents, we witness the dance of well-diggers; they are barefoot, working very quickly. The game is to get down a kind of wheelbarrow using a

motorized winch, once it reaches the bottom, another one comes out filled with sand. We are told that this tunnel had a small problem and that the team is taking the lead. The descent shaft is supported entirely of small metal plates. It plunges twenty meters deep, the horizontal hose, two or three hundred meters long to reach Egypt! We take some pictures, but soon the boss comes and prefers that we leave. I admit that I have declined the invitation to descend into the pit.

It is time to meet Khaled Mohamad Assi Zanoun. He lives in a small building whose windows overlook the tunnels and Egypt. Many graffiti on the walls and the staircase: mainly figures of martyrs. Khaled takes us into a hall, We sit on cushions on the floor. This man of forty-five years can no longer work. He was released from Israeli prisons in 1994. The prison stay has destroyed him and this is an understatement. Khaled has six daughters; three of them are deaf and dumb. The others use sign language. Before speaking, Khaled insists to offer us coffee, coffee that he will prepare himself with cardamom. Afaf and Alema, two of his daughters, bring us bananas and cake with coconut. Khaled then introduces his family, he seems almost apologetic when comes the turn of the eldest, Khouloud, completely veiled in black, we see only her beautiful eyes full of kohl and Khaled explains: "It's her will!". "I saw everything, tanks, soldiers, but also the F16s and helicopters. Here in Rafah, because of the tunnels, we had bombings every day. When they bombed, the building shook and we thought it would fall, the children screamed in the house. I took my daughters and my wife and I settled them safely in another location. Then we returned to the house and, the twelfth day of the war, a very heavy tin box, fell on the house and made a whole in the roof, it was full of papers on which were printed these words:

Get out of your houses, leave the streets near the border, get away 200 meters at least, go to the roads near the sea, if you leave those roads, we will kill you. Signed ...The Army.

Khaled has also seen the resistance fighters, he even filmed a scene with his mobile phone. Khouloud is very proud to show us the little film on the computer. You can see a tank moving in a side street and suddenly a great flame, obviously the tank just exploded! It is however difficult to be sure if this scene belongs to this war and not the previous... Khaled is very excited. He says he went out several times in the streets to help the ambulance collect the injured and dead. Then he explains that his brother, whose portrait is displayed on the wall, is a martyr of the last war and that his daughters are very proud. The family has lost a lot of things in the bombing: "All the clothes were flying, we had no windows, today, even the mattress where we sleep are not ours."

"Why do we not live in peace?"... Said one of the girls in sign language. Khaled speaks again: "I am referring to all Europeans; they must watch what is happening to Palestinian children, it is necessary that these children have the right to live like everyone else. Here we live with nightmares, insomnia, without any security. Is this a normal life? "

Khaled wants us now to meet a girl he described as very disturbed, actually Assia uses the word demoralized. We leave the apartment; all girls greet us with infinite kindness.

## **THE SILENCE OF A YOUNG GIRL**

It was enough to just walk across the street, to enter a small and dirty backyard, littered with debris, papers, peels... In a hut, under a tin roof, a whole family is sitting in the dark, on a bed. The father speaks very loudly, and the mother can hardly move, she is very fat – nine children -, legs damaged. They show Raisha, their nineteen years old daughter, saying: "Before the war, she was normal. "The girl looked at us, silent, lost in thought. Khaled who accompanied us, asked her: "You can tell your story Raicha?" The girl is silent, the father insists yelling even louder, I see her eyes turning around and suddenly she falls to the ground screaming and starts hitting Khaled and his father trying to control her. Marie-Laure put them away, took Raicha's face in her hands and calms her down. Slowly, she wakes, but she remains silent. She smiled strangely, while her mother laments: "She was such a brave girl, so smart, when the bombings began, she became mad..." "The problem, says Khaled, it is that there are thousands of cases like Raicha in Palestine!" Her sister, Heba, who is already a mother, makes Raicha drink with a kettle, there is something pathetic about this woman who drinks like a baby.

In this family, they are twelve people living in one room. We are witnessing the arrival of the youngest child, he just got out of hospital for the weekend and it was his brother who holds him. Just recently, February 10, a stone detached from a bombed house, broke his skull. He remained more than twenty days in a coma; they placed him next to his sister, taped on his arm a catheter. His head is shaved, he cannot walk and barely speaks. Before, he loved to play football. "Poor parents!"... Whispers Khaled.

## **JAMAL EID - CHANCE AND FEAR**

The covered terrace of the Hotel Marna House is crowded, lots of smoke of shisha in this room! We received lots of people who came to greet us last night. Dr. Waleed came to greet us with his daughter, a beautiful young woman who happened to be the only woman in the entire place, whose hair was not even held by some kind of veil. We also received Abu Jafar, a personality of Gaza, who is married to a French woman from Saint-Brieuc! Abu Jafar has two dreams, visiting the Louvre and a cheese factory, because he intends to start one in Gaza!

Before a last meal, I heard the story of Jamal, who will become director of the clinic that Regis has finalized today. The business has been started, a modest apartment in the center of Khan Yunis... Jamal Eid is fort-five years old: "I live in a popular residential area and, up until the war; I thought it was the most protected place in Gaza. Only families of workers live in this area and the Israelis know it. But once the war started, I realized that the army was very aggressive against civilians. So I decided to settle with my family in the safest part of the house: the corridor. We were grouped with the family of my sister. We were ten in the

corridor and I first tried to reassure this little world, telling them that the building would never be a target. The night before the invasion, I left the Al Quds hospital around 8:30 p.m. everything was quiet and empty as in a movie, only drones crossed the sky. I had to walk only 250 meters to enter my house, and it seemed very long. Once at home, the show started, we did not know if they were helicopters or tanks firing. I went to the window to see what was happening and very quickly I saw lines of light coming towards me. I thought that I was targeted and I thought I was going to die. Then a missile hit the opposite building. Other bombs exploded, and luckily I have a neighbor who lives below and left the keys of his apartment, I decided to take the family to his apartment, thinking that we would be less exposed than at the top of the building.

"Mission accomplished, I went upstairs to see if there no one was left. I got another family who followed me in this safer place on the second floor. Bombs and shoo tings had intensified by then, we had no electricity, just a few candles. Many of us, women and children were gathered in the corridor, men in the hall. During the night, they fired on the building, everything started to dance around the room, no one knew when everything was going to collapse. I started calling everywhere. I could, with my cell phone, report that there were only innocent people in this building, but even at the Al Quds hospital, they were bombarded! When the day arrived, I could see the tanks moving very quickly in the neighborhood. With the light of day we felt a little better, a woman managed to cook something with something edible she found. By nightfall, women began to read the Koran. I had no cigarettes and I became very nervous, especially since we were convinced that the Israeli army would arrive soon. Around 9 p.m., someone knocked on the door, we were very afraid and when we opened, after hiding the women and children, we found ourselves face to face, bewildered, with a young woman holding a baby in her arms. She was accompanied by an old man and just asked if we had diapers! I did not know whether to laugh or to cry...

"Anyway, since she had come here, it should be possible to move inside the building. With my wife, so we got into our apartment and we took everything we could until they started firing at the front. We passed another night and, in the morning, I cautiously looked out of the window, there were no tanks, no one. So I went down, the elevator was destroyed, as well as the entrance to the building. I saw burning cars and bodies lying near the wreckage. When I started walking down the street, people who saw me came down with me in their turn. Later, we got back in our apartment, the door was intact but when I opened it, we are left without a word, stunned, there was nothing behind the door, nothing at all, no furniture, no bed, just a small piece of the TV. All walls were black, burned. For me, it was as if the Israelis had sent us a message: no mercy for no one, we can kill whoever we want to... What to do tomorrow?"

## WHAT TO DO TOMORROW?

Jamal's question remains unanswered... At best, it feels heavy. From the outside, we cannot simply settle for quiet empathy. The return to Jerusalem was a strange moment, the customs, in the direction of the exit at Erez is surreal, scan the whole body, long walk in empty corridors... with calls in the speakers and the omnipresence of surveillance cameras. However, we are out almost easily and we were able to visit Jerusalem. I will not make another political analysis on this world where everything rubs: Arabs, Jews, Christians, to which you add pilgrims from around the world (especially from Russia). It's beautiful, more than beautiful, and it's full of anger despite chants rising from pilgrims' chorus next to the Holy Sepulcher. While we were walking on the ramparts, a young Arab who played football throws stones on us! I banally thought that violence was not a fate, but it does have a history, a history that belonged to us, all of us, and that we could change.

The exit from the airport was, to my taste, epic. Regis found it rather easy. We only took... three hours to get on the plane. One can understand the security service: "We come from Gaza!" search, questioning, re-search and, ultimately, capture of the satellite telephone – they have since returned it, somewhat in pieces. I was so tense, so uncomfortable that I am surprised and ashamed, the time of a sigh, of feeling nauseous and also impossible: hate.

And everything was cleared very quickly, because I fortunately know that, since a certain Christ, and a certain Freud, we must forgive men, because men do not always know what they do.

**And from the plane, I watched the Mediterranean coast, beautiful, where women swim in bikinis, breasts remodeled, and there, vile garbage, stinking of miseries and misfortunes. Saint-Tropez and Gaza: the same sea**

Jean-Michel Asselin  
April 21, 2009

## 10/10

The simplest would be to have had a dream. Or rather, have a nightmare. It is like if the worst crops up to your mind in a flood of unspeakable violence. In emergency medicine, to monitor the intensity of the pain of a patient, he is asked repeatedly to quantify on a scale from zero to ten: "Your pain, you feel how much? Zero is no pain at all and ten is the worst pain you can imagine!" In Gaza, during three weeks of Israeli military operation cast Lead, in response to the firing of Qassam rockets on Israel, pain, grief and injustice remained blocked at 10/10.

Emergencies are the engine of our commitment. Without thinking too much and without getting lost in pseudo-intellectualizations of the humanitarian aid to define who will be "the good or the bad victim", we act without delay and with great professionalism to succeed in saving the most lives. If care is our priority, this is not everything. When we act in this way, it is also to testify. We must give voice to those calling for help, even if getting to them may seem impossible or too dangerous. That is what we managed to do in Gaza. End of December 2008, like other NGOs, we have witnessed helplessly the earliest images of this war. Hospital doctors called "Help!" As we could not provide intensive care or operate the injured for lack of means, we have taken advantage of a small door. Indeed, the IDF instituted a cease-fire for few hours daily, and Egypt exceptionally authorized the opening of the crossing point at Rafah for humanitarians. Within 24 hours, January 10, 2009, we were in Rafah, then a night later in Gaza City.

With the relay of the few media present there, we were able to inform as many people as possible from our entry into Gaza. On site, at the Shiffa hospital, we were the only French NGO. We faced an unpredictable situation where, within minutes, we switched our role of "rescuer" to a "victim".

On January 15, we have been bombed and burned twice in one day by Israeli fire at the Al Quds, Palestinian Red Crescent hospital, where we stood with hundreds of patients and caregivers. Once the cease-fire unilaterally announced, January 19, Help Doctors wished not to stop there... because if we cared, alerted, we still had to tell.

It is always difficult to talk about Gaza without being accused of being involved as a stakeholder in this eternal conflict. Strangely, being humanitarian in Gaza confers a unique role to doctors that we are, when that mistrust is not there when we intervene in any other country in the world. All our patients told terrible stories of life and survival! For each, there was this very moment while teetering between life, fear and death.

We chose to report it as accurately as possible with their own words. Jean Michel Asselin, writer and mountaineer-psychoanalyst came to us in Gaza to hear those stories of life and write. He is not a professional of the humanitarian action. Before this mission, he only knew of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict what media transmitted whenever something goes wrong. This independence of mind and his skill as a storyteller marked him as our great witness.

All these life stories are true, comprehensive, verified and verifiable... Then, when the words reach their limits, then the images take over. We were quickly seduced by the double-original concept of "1 + ONE" that Gerard Kosicki, photographer-designer-artist, has suggested to enrich the whole compound. Here are two books that everyone can read and understand his own way. They can be opened and viewed separately, or not, in any order.

This thorough humanitarian investigation – with rigorous methodology – is now available for the NGOs in Human rights, States and UN Agencies who investigate the events that took place behind closed doors from December 27 to January 22 in Palestine.

Soon we will translate this book in English, Arabic and Hebrew. We shall go to Gaza to submit it to those who have given us their testimonies. And we shall also go to Tel Aviv to tell the Israelis who want to hear, experience the stories of ordinary people, a few tens of kilometers from home... between December 27, 2008 and January 18, 2009.

## **D<sup>r</sup> REGIS GARRIGUE—EMERGENCY DOCTOR**

### **PRESIDENT OF HELP DOCTORS**

#### **International Humanitarian Law and Geneva Conventions ICRC – International Committee of the Red Cross**

International humanitarian law is the set of rules which, in wartime, protects people who do not participate, or anymore in hostilities and imposes limits on the methods and means of combat. It applies to armed conflicts of international and non international character. The main instruments of Humanitarian Law are the Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949 for protection of war victims. These universally accepted treaties protect the injured and sick combatants, the shipwrecked, prisoners of war and civilians in enemy hands. The Geneva Conventions also protect the medical mission, hospitals, personnel, equipment and medical transportation. There are however gaps in important areas such as the conduct of combatants and the protection of civilians against the effects of hostilities. To remedy this, two Protocols were adopted in 1977 to complement, not replace, the Geneva Conventions of 1949.

International Humanitarian Law regulates only those aspects of a humanitarian nature. This is called the *jus in bello* (law in war). Its clauses also apply to all parties of the conflict, regardless of the reasons of the conflict and the justness of the cause defended by either party.

In case of international armed conflict, it is often difficult to determine which State is guilty of a violation of the UN Charter

However, the system of humanitarian law does not bind its application to the description of the culprit, as it inevitably would lead to a controversy that would paralyze its implementation, each party declaring it has been victim of aggression. In addition, humanitarian law aims to protect victims of war and their fundamental rights, to whatever party they belong. Therefore, the *jus in bello* must remain independent of *jus ad bellum* or *jus contra bellum* (right to make war or right to prevent war).

IV Geneva Convention relative to the protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, August 12, 1949, The corner stone of International Humanitarian Law

The events of the Second World War had shown how deplorable was the lack of international conventions protecting civilians in wartime. The Convention adopted in 1949 takes into account the experiences of the Second World War.

The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols are international treaties that contain the basic rules setting limits to the barbarity of war. They protect people who do not participate in hostilities (civilians, medical staff or humanitarian organizations) and those no longer taking part in the hostilities (the injured, sick shipwrecked, prisoners of war).

The Conventions and their Protocols call for measures to be taken to prevent what it called "grave breaches" or end them, the perpetrators must be punished. 194 States have acceded to the Geneva Conventions which have gained universal recognition.

### **The seven basic rules that underlie Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols**

This text is intended to facilitate the dissemination of international humanitarian law and is not the authority of an international legal instrument (Source ICRC).

1. Persons *hors de combat* and those who do not participate directly in hostilities are entitled to respect for their lives and their physical and moral integrity. Such persons shall, in all circumstances, be protected and treated humanely without any adverse distinction.
2. It is forbidden to kill or wound an adversary who surrenders or who is *hors de combat*.
3. The injured and sick shall be collected and cared for by the party of the conflict in whose power they are. Protection also covers medical personnel, facilities, transportation and medical equipment. The emblem of the Red Cross or Red Crescent is the sign of such protection and must be respected.
4. Captured combatants and civilians who are under the authority of the adverse party are entitled to respect for their lives, their dignity, their personal rights and beliefs. They will be protected against all acts of violence and retaliation. They have the right to exchange news with their families and receive assistance.
5. Everyone will benefit from fundamental judicial guarantees. No one shall be liable for an act he did not commit. No one shall be subjected to physical or mental torture, or corporal punishment, cruel or degrading.
6. The parties of the conflict and members of their armed forces have no unlimited right to choose methods and means of warfare. It is prohibited to employ weapons or methods of warfare of a nature to cause unnecessary losses or excessive suffering.
7. The parties of the conflict must at all times distinguish between civilians and combatants in order to spare the population and civilian objects.

Neither the civilian population as such, nor civilian persons shall be subject to attacks. Attacks may be directed only against military objectives.

## International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and Human Rights

International humanitarian law and international law of human rights are two branches of law, distinct but complementary. They both aim to protect people against the arbitrary and mistreatment. Human rights are inherent to humans and must protect them in all circumstances, in wartime as in peacetime. International Humanitarian Law, however, is only applicable in situations of armed conflict. Thus, in cases of armed conflict, these two bodies of law apply in a complementary manner.

Basic legal provisions concerning the occupation of a territory by a hostile power and their implications for persons protected by international humanitarian law

A territory is considered "occupied" when it is actually placed under the authority of foreign armed forces partially or wholly, without the consent of the national government. The occupation extends only to territories where such authority is established and can be exercised. International humanitarian law applies to all situations where these conditions are met, whatever the reasons and motives that lead to occupation, as a declared intention to "liberate" the population of a country, regardless the legality of the occupation under international law.