

Narratives Under Siege (1): Al-Shifa Hospital, Gaza city



Moin Ali Mahmoud al-Wadiya at the Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza city.

Moin Ali Mahmoud al-Wadiya was working in the al-Zaytoun district of east Gaza city when Israeli Occupying forces (IOF) invaded al-Zaytoun on January 15th. The forty eight year old mechanic immediately tried to flee the intense IOF shelling, but when he stopped in order to drag a critically injured civilian to safety, the ground beneath him exploded. When he regained consciousness, in Gaza city's main al-Shifa hospital, Moin al-Wadiya had lost his left foot. His right leg is smashed and he has serious lacerations across his stomach.

"I have six children" he says. "But now there is no-one to support my family."

Nineteen Palestinians were killed during the IOF invasion of al-Zaytoun and neighbouring Shejae'a district, and another thirty people were injured, including several, like Moin al-Wadiya, who sustained critical injuries. During the first nineteen days of 2008, Israeli military attacks in the Gaza Strip killed a total of 71 Palestinians, and injured more than 190 others.

As a human rights organisation committed the protection and promotion of human rights and international humanitarian law, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) condemns the fact that the Israeli military continues to launch indiscriminate attacks on densely populated neighbourhoods of Gaza, where it is impossible to distinguish between civilians and military objects. This continued use of disproportionate force is a contravention of international law, including the Fourth

Geneva Convention, and is putting the lives of Palestinian civilians at great risk of death and serious injury.

Moin al-Wadiya is being treated at the Gaza city al-Shifa hospital, where the staff constantly struggle to cope amidst chronic shortages of medical equipment, essential drugs and fuel. The hospital director, Dr Hassan Khalaf, describes the situation at al-Shifa as "Potentially disastrous." He explains that, "Out of an essential drug list of 480 items recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO), we are already ninety items short. Out of the 390 items we do have in stock, we have less than three months supply of 130 items."

Some of the essential drugs no longer available include strong painkillers. Moin al-Wadiya's family are buying his painkillers from a local pharmacy because he says the drugs at al-Shifa are not effective.

The staff at al-Shifa also face the daily reality of a power failure at the hospital that would, according to Dr Khalef, be fatal for dozens of patients who are totally dependent on electricity to power ventilators, dialysis machines and other life-saving equipment. A power cut at al-Shifa would also immediately kill 30 premature babies surviving in incubators at the hospital, including Karim, a seriously premature week-old baby boy twin being treated in the hospital neonatal intensive care unit.

The tightening Israeli siege and closure of the Gaza Strip is collectively punishing the entire population of the Gaza Strip, despite the fact, reiterated by PCHR and other human rights organisations, that collective punishment of a civilian population is illegal under international law and international humanitarian law. This collective punishment has severely affected every aspect of civilian life in Gaza, including the availability of electricity, drugs, medical equipment and construction materials. A half-constructed building stands in front of Dr Khalef's office. It is meant to be a new specialist surgical unit, but construction was stopped completely seven months ago, because the hospital couldn't obtain any more concrete due to a total IOF ban on imports of construction materials into the Gaza Strip. The Ministry of Religious Affairs in Gaza recently appealed for assistance in making more graves available, also due to chronic shortages of concrete, so the people of Gaza can bury their dead with dignity.

Al-Shifa hospital receives approximately 4,000 admissions a month and is constantly trying to balance patient provision with scarce and unpredictable resources.

"Recently, we've been forced to reduce the size and constituency of patient meals" says Dr Khalef, "and we have completely stopped providing staff meals." In the last six months the hospital has dealt with a hundred fatalities and more than 230 injuries from IOF attacks. Some of the men, women and children who have been injured are, like Moin al-Wadiya, now maimed for life. But the al-Shifa physiotherapy unit can do very little to help them. "To be honest, we have little physiotherapy to offer" says Dr Khalef. "And, unfortunately we do not have services for people with life time injuries."

Moin al-Wadiya is remarkably philosophical about his injuries. "I bled a lot" he says from his hospital bed. "I saw people flying through the air and bodies cut to pieces. But this is my destiny. Just I worry for my family, because I was the only one working to support us."