

Aftermath (8) Life is blind

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In this series of personal testimonies, PCHR looks at the aftermath of Israel's 23 day offensive on the Gaza Strip, and the ongoing impact it is having on the civilian population.

Words by Malian/PCHR



Mahmoud before and after the attack that claimed his sight

Mahmoud Mattar spent his 15th birthday in February this year, lying in the intensive care unit of Egypt's Sheikh Zayid hospital. He is one of the 1,606 children who were injured during Israel's military offensive on Gaza, some of who sustained horrific disabilities, head and spinal injuries, facial disfigurement, burns and amputation.

On Wednesday 7 January 2009, Mahmoud Mattar, then 14, was struck by a rocket near his home in Sheikh Radwan, Gaza City, that left him permanently blind and with extensive injuries. It was around 09:30 in the morning and Mahmoud was at home with his mother and siblings when an Israeli aircraft fired a missile at al-Taqwa mosque, 150 metres away.

Mahmoud ran to see what had happened, and shortly afterwards a second missile hit the scene, killing two 15 year old boys, including Abdullah Juda, one of Mahmoud's school friends. Mahmoud's uncle, Nahed Mattar, 43, went to find his nephew while people gathered in the area.



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Just as Nahed reached out to grab Mahmoud, a third rocket hit. “I had gone to find Mahmoud and bring him home,” said Nahed. “I saw the two boys who had been killed and their bodies were dismembered. People were trying to evacuate them because ambulances were unable to reach the area and the mosque had been destroyed, with just a minaret left standing.:

As Nahed reached out for Mahmoud’s hand, a rocket landed just a metre and a half away from his nephew: “I was injured in the head and Mahmoud was thrown unconscious. His face was in a terrible shape – it has only improved now after numerous operations – and there were shrapnel injuries all over his body.”

The last thing Mahmoud remembers that day was his uncle was beside him: “I told my uncle something was going to hit us. I couldn’t see the missile but I could feel something was going to happen. I made my ‘shahaadah’ [Muslim declaration of faith before death] and was about to take a step forward. I don’t remember anything after that.”

Mahmoud’s eyes were burnt, and his facial bones were fractured. His lower jaw was broken, he lost some of his teeth, and had shrapnel injuries and third degree burns throughout his body.

Mahmoud was transferred to Gaza City’s Shifa hospital where the seriousness of his condition meant transfer to hospital in Egypt was essential. But later that same day, 7 January 2009, an ambulance convoy belonging to the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, was fired upon traveling south of Gaza City, so Mahmoud had to wait until the 10 of January before he could be transferred. In Egypt Mahmoud endured numerous operations to reconstruct his face and bone transplants. He also suffered lung damage due to smoke inhalation and his breathing is now laboured.

Mahmoud spent a total of three months and ten days in hospital in Egypt, including one month in the intensive care unit of Sheikh Zayid hospital, and two months in Cairo’s Palestine hospital. He returned to the Gaza Strip in late April 2009 and is now trying to adapt to his new circumstances. Mahmoud’s father is unemployed and has health problems and the school for the blind in Gaza normally only accepts younger children. His family is now trying to arrange special dispensation so Mahmoud can continue his education.

“Mahmoud was very active in school and loved sports”, says his mother Randa Mattar, aged 36. “He loved gymnastics, especially in the sea. My son is the same person he was before.”

“The only different thing with me is that life is blind now,” adds Mahmoud, as he playfights with his younger brothers. “Sounds are much louder to me now. Now if an ant walks by, I hear it.”

The prospect of lifelong care for severely injured children who survived Israeli attacks is too much to bear for Gazan families already vulnerable after two years of border closures, 42 years of military occupation, and rising poverty levels.



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While some of the costs of Mahmoud's hospitalization were covered by the Palestinian Ministry of Health, he needs more follow up care and support and the ability to travel for further treatment.

“Mahmoud also needs cosmetic surgery and to be fitted with glass eyes,” explains Nahed, who stayed with his nephew for the duration of his time in Egypt and has developed a very close bond with him. “We will have to find the money to pay for that ourselves, somehow.”