

Gazans allowed to return to the devastated north

Thomas Scripps
28 January 2025

Hundreds of thousands of Gazans are returning to cities in the North of the Strip which lie in near total ruin after a more than year long genocidal siege and grinding onslaught by Israel. Pictures bear comparison only with the scenes of devastation in the aftermath of the Second World War.

According to the United Nations, 92 percent of dwellings are either destroyed (160,000) or severely or partially damaged (276,000). Sixty percent of all buildings are damaged or destroyed—rising to 70 percent in North Gaza and 74 percent in Gaza City—and 70 percent of the road network.

Families moving back from the desperately overcrowded South are more often than not travelling only with what they can carry on foot, and returning to rubble and holes in the ground where their homes once stood.

Lubnar Nassar, who returned to her husband, told the BBC, “The warmth of reunion was overshadowed by the bitter reality—we no longer have a home, so we moved from a tent in the south to a tent in the north.”

Mohammed Badr, a father of 10, told Reuters, “It has been three days since we came back, and we cannot find water to drink. We cannot find covers to keep our children warm. We depend on bonfires all night. We wish to have some firewood for the bonfire, we use plastic, which causes diseases.”

His wife explained, “There is nothing left, you cannot walk in the streets. Houses collapsed on top of each other. You get lost, you don’t know if this is your home or not. The smell of dead bodies, and the martyrs are in the streets.”

Trying to sum up the scale and speed of the damage, Achim Steiner, head of the UN Development Programme, told AFP: “We estimate that roughly 60 years of development have been lost in this conflict over 15 months.

“Two million people who are in the Gaza Strip have lost not only their shelter: they’ve lost public infrastructure, sewage treatment systems, freshwater supply systems, public waste management. All of these fundamental infrastructure and service elements simply do not exist...

“Virtually every school and every hospital has been either severely damaged or destroyed. It’s an extraordinary physical destruction that has happened.”

As Steiner noted, “Human desperation is not just something that you capture in statistics.” But the figures are stark.

Fewer than half of Gaza’s hospitals are even partially functional; less than 40 percent of primary health care centres (six out of 138 fully functional, and 46 partially); and less than a quarter of UNRWA health centres.

The water supply is less than a quarter what it was prior to October 2023, and subject to a 70 percent rate of water loss due to damaged supply networks. Roughly half of Gaza’s agricultural wells and greenhouses are damaged, plus over two thirds of its cropland, half its sheep and 95 percent of its cattle.

It will be some time before much of the population can even begin to worry about the 88 percent of school buildings requiring full or major rehabilitation, or its 51 destroyed and 57 damaged university buildings.

What is left is not capable of sustaining a society, as rates of disease and early death will soon prove. Already, an estimated 12,000 patients need medical transfer out of Gaza—fewer than 500 were allowed through the walls of the Israeli siege in the last 15 months. Tens of thousands of children require treatment for acute malnutrition.

Again according to the UN, one million people (76 percent of Gaza’s population) are at risk of sanitation threats like rodents and pests, solid waste (54 percent) and human waste (34 percent).

Arwa Damon, the founder of the International Network for Aid, Relief and Assistance, described the situation on

the ground to Al Jazeera.

“Only a few hundred tents have been moved into the north, where all of these families are arriving... So, they are arriving to the north with no shelter and very little access to clean drinking water.

“There is a big fuel shortage and then there is also the issue of getting to food distribution points as there is no transportation.

“What we are hearing a lot from families is that it is very difficult because you have to walk hours to try to get access to food and clean water—not to mention medical and other facilities.”

As well as a disaster zone, Gaza is one enormous crime scene. From the outset, the Israeli government was clear on its intention to ethnically cleanse the Palestinians. By April of last year—the last available estimate—it had bombarded Gaza, a territory of just 360 square kilometres, with the equivalent of roughly 75,000 tonnes of TNT in pursuit of that end.

This is equivalent to dropping five of the type of nuclear bomb used at Hiroshima on an area less than half as large as the Japanese city.

Now the second stage of the plan is coming clearly into view, openly stated by the fascist president of the United States Donald Trump and cheered by the Israeli far-right.

Trump told reporters on Saturday of Gaza that the US and its allies should “just clean out that whole thing,” suggesting the Palestinians be moved to Jordan and Egypt. The two countries’ governments quickly protested the suggestion, well aware that such a policy would provoke a social explosion threatening their very survival.

But the US president repeated himself this week, saying, “I wish [Egyptian president, Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi] would take some. We helped them a lot, and I’m sure he’d help us. He’s a friend of mine. He’s in ... a rough neighbourhood. But I think he would do it, and I think the king of Jordan would do it too.”

Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich enthused that the “US president is finally acknowledging reality... There is no doubt that, in the long-term, encouraging emigration is the only solution... I am working with the prime minister and the cabinet to prepare an operational plan and ensure the realization of President Trump’s vision.”

He continued, “There is nothing to be excited about the weak opposition of Egypt and Jordan to the plan. We saw yesterday how Trump [imposed his will on] Colombia to deport immigrants despite its opposition. When he wants it, it happens.”

Already, an estimated 100,000 Gazans have fled the

Strip—in the earlier stages of the war when this was still possible—frequently selling everything they owned to pay for passage over the border with Egypt. Hala Consulting and Tourism Services—owned by El-Sisi ally Ibrahim Alarjani—holds a monopoly on the crossing and made roughly \$2 million a day until Israel invaded Rafah last May.

The lives of the 100,000 in Egypt are cruelly stunted, with all of them banned from employment and excluded from the education, banking and health systems. Palestinian refugees are aided by UNRWA rather than the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, but UNRWA has no official mandate in Egypt, leaving Gazans with next to no support.

Plans to complete this process with the wholesale removal of the roughly 2 million still living in Gaza take shape under the threat of a resumed military offensive.

Senior editor at the Israeli magazine +972 Ben Reiff warned in the *Guardian* Tuesday:

Even before the Israeli government officially approved the ceasefire deal on 18 January, reports emerged that cast doubt on Netanyahu’s commitment to its full realisation. The prime minister had apparently agreed to the demand of Israel’s far-right finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, that fighting resume after the first of the ceasefire’s three phases elapsed. Although Netanyahu refrained from admitting this publicly, sources present in those discussions as well as journalists close to Netanyahu stressed that the chances of the deal reaching its second phase are close to zero.

The Israel Defense Forces have already violated the terms of the ceasefire in Lebanon. Gaza’s Ministry of Health reported Tuesday that 11 Palestinians were killed in the last 48 hours by Israeli soldiers, including by tank and sniper fire. The Palestinian Red Crescent reported shooting against one of its ambulances.



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