

During Truce, Gazans Gather Bodies, Reveal Destruction, Seek Relatives

Sunday 3 December 2023, by [HASS Amira](#) (Date first published: 27 November 2023).

Almost two days without the incessant roar of fighter jets, the invasive hum of drones, and the thunder of explosions and rocket launches allowed the residents of the Gaza Strip to sleep without disturbance and fear, for the first time in the past seven weeks.

This was immediately evident in phone conversations with a few of them, who sounded a bit relieved and even as if they were smiling in a few cases. [They begged to hear good news: that the cease-fire would last more than four days.](#) This was a few hours before Saturday night's announcement of the delay in the release of the Israeli hostages – which immediately reinstated the oppressive anxiety about renewed bombings in Gaza.

Palestinians gather as they wait to receive flour bags distributed by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) during a temporary truce between Hamas and Israel, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, November 27, 2023. Credit: IBRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA/ REUTERS

A woman embraces a child as Palestinians wait to receive flour bags distributed by UNRWA during a temporary truce between Hamas and Israel, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, November 27, 2023. Credit: IBRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA/ REUTERS

Telephone and internet connections improved during the two days of the truce. Without bombs, there are fewer disruptions in communication. Family members who are far from each other, who could only inform each other through text messages that they were still alive, managed over the weekend to speak directly and get updates. “But I couldn’t access articles on the Haaretz website,” said M, [one of the residents of Gaza who were displaced from their homes in the war.](#)

Even before the cease-fire, some of the displaced people announced that as soon as it went into effect they would travel [to the northern part of the Strip to see what happened to their homes](#), to take some necessary items or even to return to live there. “Anything is better than the unbearable crowding” in the schools or in relatives’ apartments, they explained.

Al-Shifa Hospital after the area around it was raided by Israeli forces during its ground operation, amid a temporary truce between Israel and the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, in Gaza City, November 25, 2023. Credit: REUTERS/Abed Sabah

Palestinians walk by buildings destroyed in the Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip in Nusseirat refugee camp, central Gaza Strip, on November 25, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Adel Hana

According to estimates, some thousands of people attempted to return north, and Palestinian media reported that soldiers fired tear gas canisters and even live ammunition at those who walked or drove.

Due to the lack of space for the thousands of uprooted people who continued to flow south, most of the men and older boys have been sleeping under the open sky; in the courtyards of schools that have been turned into shelters for the displaced, or in the street near the outer walls of those buildings. This is according to reports of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

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[Several hundred families were housed in tents](#) near one of the UNRWA schools, which are being used as shelters. Due to the overcrowding and chronic water shortages, the number of people suffering from disease and infection due to poor sanitation rises significantly every day – including skin diseases, acute respiratory infections, diarrhea and lice. In some areas in Rafah, sewage began to flow in the streets because there is no fuel to operate the city's only wastewater treatment facility, and due to damage to the local sewage infrastructure.

If Hamas is in fact encouraging residents to return to the northern part of the Strip, as reported in Israeli media, then in conversations with several individuals expressing a desire to return home, if only to see what remains of it, or due to homesickness, one could get the impression that they're doing so of their own free will. According to estimates, some thousands of people attempted to return north, and Palestinian media reported that soldiers fired tear gas canisters and even live ammunition at those who walked or drove. It is unclear how many of them succeeded in reaching their destination. OCHA reported at least one fatality from the gunfire and dozens of injuries on Friday. Also on that day, according to UN estimates, only about 400 people crossed to the southern part of the Strip.

Palestinians visit the beach in Deir al Balah, Gaza Strip, on the second day of a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas. Credit: AP Photo/Hatem Moussa<

The cease-fire made it possible for Gazans to absorb the dimensions of the destruction: Those who managed to reach the north, or those who had remained in Gaza City, were able to walk outside for a longer period of time than in the previous days of the war. They filmed videos that were immediately distributed online—including documentation of the al-Shati refugee camp and the areas of al-Shifa Hospital.

One of the public buildings that were destroyed is the Rashad Al-Shawa Cultural Center, in the Rimal neighborhood. For decades, the place served as a site for cultural events, local and international conferences and social gatherings. Those who walked among the ruins also reported finding many dead bodies, most of them in a state of decomposition. Palestinian news sites reported the discovery of the body of Mohammed Hamada, who had been released in the 2011 Gilad Shalit deal, exiled to Gaza, and became the official Hamas spokesperson for Jerusalem affairs.

On Friday, the first day of the cease-fire, more aid trucks entered Gaza through the Rafah crossing than on any day since Israel began to permit their entry on October 21. Two hundred trucks entered the Strip, and 137 reached the UNRWA distribution point. Four tankers were also brought in, containing 84 tons of cooking gas – for the first time since the beginning of the war – as well as 129,000 liters of fuel, which UNRWA is responsible for distributing. The fuel is intended for generators in hospitals that are still functioning, for water and sanitation facilities, for shelters

where food is distributed, and for other essential services.

According to the United Nations, a convoy of the organizations's aid trucks succeeded in reaching two UNRWA facilities in northern Gaza, in which displaced persons are sheltering, and the agency's personnel began distributing flour and also assessing the health conditions of the displaced. As of Saturday, there were no reports of distribution of food or other aid items. According to reports, there is no flour at all in the northern Gaza Strip and no functioning bakery in the area.

In recent weeks, aid organizations have not been able to distribute food in the northern Strip, and their people fear the deterioration in the health conditions of the thousands who remained there - especially nursing women and children. The seawater desalination plant and the pipeline supplying drinking water, which Israel sells to the Palestinian Authority, also ceased to operate.

As a result, the people in northern Gaza are drinking water that is not suitable for drinking, and sometimes even sea water. Others barely drink, and it is believed that many are suffering from dehydration and diseases transmitted through contaminated water. In the past two weeks, no bottled water was distributed in the north, because Israel did not allow aid organizations to reach the areas north of the Gaza River.

Those who remained in northern Gaza have the impression that their numbers are much higher than what is depicted in reports. This is also what they themselves told their relatives in the south. One resident in the north said the Gaza City municipality is still operating garbage collection teams, removing debris blocking roads as much as possible, and working to ensure water supply (not for drinking) once every two days. Nevertheless, she added, the food that remains for residents who are still staying in their homes is running out - and the prices have skyrocketed.

Amira Hass

P.S.

- Haaretz. Nov 27, 2023:

<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2023-11-27/ty-article-magazine/.premium/during-truce-gazans-gather-bodies-reveal-destruction-seek-relatives/0000018c-0fe5-d65f-a7dd-fff742d10000>

- Amira Hass' articles in Haaretz:

<https://www.haaretz.com/ty-WRITER/0000017f-da24-d494-a17f-de27b9aa0000>