

40 days in the wilderness

Imagine yourself being in a place that lacks water, food and proper living conditions. Imagine suffering health problems and staying under the hot sun and facing cold nights for more than 40 consecutive days. Imagine people around you are dying. Imagine having no hope for a resolution of this problem. Certainly, we hope you will never be in such a situation, but this is what is happening at this moment for more than 6,000 persons stuck on the Palestinian-Egyptian border.

More than 6,000 Palestinians are trapped between Egypt and the Gaza Strip awaiting a solution to get them out of this catastrophic situation.

They are waiting relief or any kind of support as a quick response to their needs. They want to return back home to Gaza and they do not have any money nor visas to return back to Egypt. According to media reports today (July 19 2007 - <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/883966.html>) some 30,000 other Palestinians are waiting at other locations in Egypt to return to Gaza. They are less than five kilometres away from their home, but Rafah crossing remains closed and it is the only gate out and in for Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. It has remained closed since Hamas' takeover of the Gaza Strip.



Palestinians waiting Rafah to open on the Egyptian city of Areesh. (Photo: AFP via Al-Ayyam newspaper.)

We in Caritas Jerusalem spoke to Ali who has been trapped on the border for 32 days. He said angrily, "We are only a few kilometres away from the border. Our life looks like hell here. I can't take a shower. I can't go back to Egypt. I can't enter my home [Gaza], I can't find or buy good food, I have no money ... A woman last week died here as well as many others. These days are the worst in my life and if my situation remains like this, I prefer to die."

During our call with Ali, he was coughing. He suffers health problems after staying all this time without shelter or warmth at night. Talking about the situation, he said, "There is little support that helps us stay alive. We need to go to our homes. We don't want to stay here."



Palestinians loading their bags hoping Rafah crossing to open. (Photo: Reuters - 9 June, 2007 via yahoo news.)

Ali was in France before coming back to Gaza. His family, work and whole life is in Gaza. He wants to return, but he cannot. He dreamt many times of having Rafah open, but he woke up to the bitter reality.

During our call with Ali, the line was cut. We tried to call him again, but without success.

Death chases Palestinians wherever they go

Many people travelled to Egypt to escape from the deteriorating situation, when they heard about some improvement, they came back expecting one or two days on the border, but the worst happened; the crossing has closed for 40 days. Many went to have medical treatment in Egypt, but they returned in coffins back to Gaza after long processes of coordination with the Israeli authorities for their entry.

Last Saturday, medical sources announced the deaths of 28 Palestinians who had been trapped in Egypt due to the closure of the Rafah Crossing since the 1st of June. Of the 28 casualties, 5 had died at the crossing. The rest died in Egyptian medical facilities.

Ashraf, a Gazan from Jabaliya Refugee Camp, told Caritas Jerusalem that the contact with his brother has halted for weeks. He said, "My brother phoned three weeks ago telling us that the situation is a disaster on the Egyptian side of the border and no one is paying them any attention."

The urgent humanitarian crisis on the Palestinian-Egyptian border is growing seriously. A quick response and intervention of the international community are urgently required as soon as possible before it is too late.

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