

“I don't know how to fight, I don't know how to resist, I only want to save the remains of my family.”

BY Alberto Arce. Special service for EL MUNDO

From Yabalia refugee camp. Gaza Strip. December 30th, 2008.

It has been raining incessantly over Jabalya refugee camp, one of the most populated and dismal in entire Palestinian Diaspora, at the north of Gaza. Humidity, coldness, children walking barefoot or in sandals through streets turned into quagmires, as they make their way to queue for hours to obtain some flour for baking over home made wood stoves.

There is no more gas, no electricity flow and the meager trees and bushes surrounding the camp have become the only source of fuel left to sustain daily life amid the throng of bombs which Israel devotes them. The road from Gaza city center to the camp, which requires no more than fifteen minutes to traverse is a succession of images which I believe myself to have previously only seen in films and which bring to memory the white and black of Europe in the 40s. From “Rome, an open city” to Gaza an enclosed city. Ghetto images once again slam our retinas. After having declared “never again”, I see before me buildings blown to dust, dirt trenches, much garbage and piles of stones, people who wander to no end, and children, most of all children. Children everywhere. Children who cannot go to school.

Many of them make an attempt at symbolic help, trying to feel useful through the debris of shops and dwellings which once surrounded the mosque of Jabalya, the objective of this outing. Make do in the absence of bulldozers, brooms, washbasins and plastic containers. In the most disfigured part of the camp, colliding with the metal jumble which once was car repair shops and a small supermarket, presided over by the skeleton of a burnt car, a reliable witness to what had happened, hundreds of people take turns cluttering one small tent.

Only men can be seen, sitting in three rows of plastic chairs, smoking on end and drinking coffee offered by more children. Childhood-less children. Who from birth grow accustomed to adult scenes such as this. Pairs of F-16s which appear now and again, flying low, elicit practically no response from the Palestinians, do however throw the stranger to the ground. Sadly, all of those present seem to have grown accustomed, and enquire as to the cause for my alarm. They even joke about, asking how much time I've spent here and inviting me to stay with them until I grow accustomed. In the midst of this improvised vigil, sits a silent man, his arm in a sling and his head in bandages through which wounds are visible, he receives kisses and hugs. He remains practically unresponsive to all. He stares bewildered at his Surroundings, and every once in a while breaks down crying. He is still in a state of shock. His beard is unkempt and he is covered by various layers of sweaters and jackets to keep from him the humid cold which penetrates the scene and soaks through the bones of all those present.

His name is Anwar Khalil Balusha, he is 37 years old, and 24 hours ago he has lost 5 of his daughters. The night of the 29th of December, around 1 AM, an Israeli

combat plane launched a missile on the Imad Akel mosque, main prayer locale for the refugee camp and named after the Hamas leader assassinated by Israel in 1993. At least three other mosques were bombed that same night, to which many now refer as the night of the mosques. Each night since the attacks began has received its own name> the mosques, the ministries, the university, the police stations, and the ambulances. Each have received their part.

As opposed to other mourning tents which we have visited, this one does not fly any flags. It is a sign of humility and a demonstrative of the profile of the folk we are about to encounter inside. The destitution of the surroundings is palpable. Coffee is scarce, and the dates which often accompany this type of setting are missing. The neat groomed beards and customary tunics of Hamas members are nowhere to be glimpsed among, the visitors. They all seem like humble workers, common folk, simple survivors untainted by any master other than dignified poverty. At once, one of the cousins of the family approaches us, drawing us nearer to the father's chair, and after conveying to him our condolences, attempts to help him commence his labored tale. He finds it difficult to focus on the questions, despite demonstrating hospitality and he seems, at all times, prey to a type selective memory which draws on a place of little description, emotional rather than analytical. We ask and he strings together unconnected monologues about the moment when it all ended. We ask him about his family, and he makes reference to his father who had died years ago, before speaking of his daughters and wife. Many of the Gaza strip residents are refugees originating in villages which were destroyed in 1948 and were situated in what is today the state of Israel. Anwar Balusha begins his tale at that point in time. The name of the village was Al Majdal and in its place today stands the Israeli town of Ashdod. It stands but 15 kilometers away, his place of origin can be viewed from any roof top in the refugee camp.

Anwar, 37 years old, has lost his house, just as his father in his days lost his home. But this time it wasn't Irgun militants who expelled them, at the point of a bayonet, rather the nearly well aimed missile of an F-16. While as in 1948 no family member had died, on this occasion he has lost five daughters. Another three daughters and a boy of 13 months, have survived, as well as his wife. The Balusha family is a family torn to pieces. One of many. An especially painful case.

Yet merely the first on a long list of collateral effects, civilian victims of this Israeli offensive over the Gaza strip. Seven of his daughters used to sleep in the same room, Tahreir, 18 years of age, Imam, 16, Ikram, 14, Sammar, 11, Samah, 10, Deina, 8, Jawahar, 4. Of these only Imam and Samah have survived, along their mother and the head of the family, and Mohammed and Barah, who used to sleep in the same bed as their parents. Mohammed is 12 months old and Barah is only 14 days. Three of the four walls of the humble house in which they lived remain standing under the immense weight of one the wings of the mosque. It threatens to collapse at any moment. The entrance has remained unutilized and the only means of access are through an adjacent shop, which has also been bombed. The floor is nothing more than debris. Clearing the way, Anwar accompanies us, picks up the remains of a tricycle and asks, raising his tone for the first time, if this is the type of arms Israel is seeking to destroy. He refers to his daughters' tricycle as babies' tank, trying to piece together a politically coherent tale, as readily could any

Palestinian upon being questioned by a stranger. His speech fails him. He is speechless. He can hardly articulate a word. A couple of sentences and silence reigns again.

The fact is he doesn't care who the terrorist is in this case, whether it's him or the people who had sent the planes. He is only a simple father who has just lost five daughters and he cannot seem to begin to grasp the motive for this. Poor and illiterate. We manage to find some of his girls' school notebooks beneath the stones. Mickey Mouse, animated characters and a Barbie doll covered in veil. The same as any other girl in any other part of the world. A book "English for Palestine". The girls' names are written on the notebooks, and inside one we find grades awarded by the refugee school that his eldest daughters used to visit. He CANNOT for the life of him remember to which of them it belonged. He insists time and again to explain to us that the house hadn't more than two rooms and a small kitchen, next to which the toilet lay. The rectangular structure which we observe is no greater than 40 squared meters. By all accounts insufficient space to harbor a family of 11, the average size for any family in this refugee camp.

The entrance which used to face the street opened directly into the parents bedroom. He is straining to point out the features. On the walls still remain humidity stains produced by the rains which the asbestos roof failed to screen. The house was constantly leaking. It is easy to imagine the cold and humidity suffered by the little Balusha girls as they tried to work hard on their homework, packed in that miserable hovel no greater than 10 squared meters. Anwar insists that despite being very humble, it was his home, the fruit of his own labor. The place where every night Tahreir prepared his hookah, joking around while doing it, even bringing the mouth piece closer to his mouth, hanging at his neck, enjoying the way her father smoked. The place where Ikram continuously insisted that her parents let her go out on some errand or other and take her brother Mohammed with her so that she could show him off to her friends. The place where Deina used to sit together with her mother helping her in the kitchen, learning to bake bread, to serve tea to their guests' satisfaction and to prepare for the different rites which she was to practice once she commenced to wear hijab in public, like her mother, whose hijab she had always asked to borrow. Just several weeks ago the united nations has given them a washing machine. The sisters found it fascinating, they sat and watched as it turned, impressed by the only other electronic devise in the house apart from the radio.

What were they doing at the moment the explosion occurred? What can he recall?

We had been in bed for hours, awake, for the cold and fear. Seven of my daughters were in their room. And the two smaller ones slept with us. When we felt the mosque collapse over us, I only managed to grab my wife and the two little ones and drag them to the street. The rest of the girls were left buried under a meter and a half of rubble. They were alive, we could hear them scream, the neighbors poured in immediately, and some time later an ambulance. It took them an hour and a half to reach them. By hand. No machines. We heard their screams. Tahreir was alive. Tahreir could have been saved had they managed to pull her out faster.

We haven't machines, or shovels nor any other instrument which can help lift up stones. They moved me away from there. I wanted to help. But they wouldn't let me. I only remember the girls and my wife screaming. Everyone was screaming and someone fought with me to get me out of the house.

Had they tried to find refuge in some safer place?

The first night of the bombings we went to my wife's house, with her family. But there were already 11 people there and there was no room or food for all, so that after the first day we decided to return to our house. All the families try to stay together but there wasn't enough room. We knew that this camp is a dangerous place. I didn't let my girls leave the house ever since the beginning of the bombings. They were upset with me at first, but I didn't want anything to happen to them. All we could do was sit and wait. Now we cannot even wait any longer. We have nothing left. We are alone and god has decided to take away my daughters. I haven't any hope left. I don't know where to go. I don't know what to do. My wife has taken two of the girls to her family's house. The two little ones cry all the time. I can't say anything to them. Not even my wife heeds me now because I was unable to protect our daughters.

What do you do for a living?

I have been sick for years. My psychology is weak and my daughters knew it was impossible to argue with me. That I get angry easily. That I have many problems and have been on medication for a long time. Before I used to work in what I could, helping other families with the construction of their homes, but it's been eight years since I've been able to find any work and I depend entirely on the help we get from some religious organizations and the rations from the united nations. For a long time now, no help has been forthcoming and our neighbors have been helping us. Milk, sugar, oil and flour haven't been scarce for weeks and my wife's family took care of us. I can't work because many families at the camp are in the same situation. I didn't want to be provided for by my wife's family but I had no other option.

Are you a member of any political party? Israel reassures that it only attacks Hamas members.

I can't think about those things. I have psychological problems. Politics don't interest me. I've never gone to either Hamas or Fatah to seek help. Only from the mosque and my wife's family and my neighbors. Do you think I would live under these conditions if I were a Hamas member, in a leaking house with no food? Before this I didn't care what happened with Israel. But now I want the criminals to be put on trial. I seek only justice. I don't know how to fight, I don't know how to resist, I can't shoot. I don't care for violence because it is useless. But I believe in the existence of justice. I want justice implemented. When someone kills they detain him and bring him before a judge, who indites him so that he ends up in prison. I know that this is right. And this is what they taught me would happen if some day somebody hurt us. That is all I ask for. Justice. Now I don't have a

family. My wife and two youngest ones are going to live with her family, I will stay with my brother and one girl is still in the hospital. I only want to bring back my family together. A house where we could begin a new life.

Anwar leads us to the house where his wife is passing the mourning period together with the rest of the women in the camp and her family. They won't let him in. The feminine space, is often forbidden to the men. Anwar yells and argues. He causes a stir. He demands to enter. Inside the ambiance is nearly completely obscure, 30 women or so are crying, seated on the ground. In the center, his wife Sameira, with Barah of 13 months in her arms, and Mohammed on a blanket to her left, recalls details which the father is unable to articulate in these moments. Tahreir was the spirit of the house. She speaks unreservedly of how she was the only one who could have pulled the family out of dire straits. She wanted to study medicine. She had convinced her father to support her in her studies. Everyone would work so that she could accomplish her dream. She was the most serious and mature of the sisters. They knew that she would accomplish her dream. The situation becomes tense and the couple begins to argue in loud voices. Sameira blames her husband for not being able to protect her, telling him to leave, that there was nothing left for him to do there. The wife's sisters join in the discussion, the father loses his nerve. He is unable to command respect. He has lost all independence, we come to understand reproaches which aim at large and refer to the mental state of the head of the family. He is practicably insulted. The family seems to be torn up in grief, bitterness, impotence and extreme want. The wife's relatives intervene in the discussion also because from now on they will be the ones who take care of the surviving children. Now the family has been shattered for good. The mother is also wearing bandages around her head, as one can see beneath her hijab. The father hurls one of the notebooks to the ground. With this simple memory, he breaks down crying, accompanied by Mohammed, who due to the multiple wounds which show on his face, seems to be in an absolute state of shock. Once again laments and screams flood the room.

The Balusha family will be a long time in healing, if ever they do. Silently, we walk away. Asking too many questions tips over the box of emotions. They were children. Now they are no more. Their parents will be a long time in recuperating, that is, as much as any human being is able to recuperate from the loss of five daughters in one instant. This hasn't been a text of many quotations. But as Dr. Iyad Sarraj, a psychiatrist, director of the community mental health program in the Gaza strip and speaker for the international campaign against the blockade had explained in a conference merely two days before the bombings: the Palestinian family is in the process of deconstruction due to the violence. 11.000 prisoners in Israeli prisons, parents who cannot provide basic foods for their children, or notebooks with which to go to school. Unemployed, they go out to the streets everyday so that they don't have to look at their children crying, who feel themselves to be inadequate educators, unable to preach values, to generate hope for the future. Children who from the onset of their lives, know death with the same casualness as games. The Palestinian society is increasingly under threat as a collective, since it is a community attempting to sustain itself.

Unfortunately, the Balusha family are not the only ones who are losing their children. Merely 24 hours after hearing from the Al Awda hospital terrace the missile of the Jabalya mosque, and while conversing with the ambulance personal at the Kamal Adwan hospital entrance, at the Beit Lahie refugee camp, we witnessed the Hamadan family placing their dying children in the hands the medical staff. Lama of 4 years was dead upon arrival and, Haya of 12, died after 10 minutes of intense resuscitation efforts by the medical staff and their brother Ismail died a few hours later, victim to multiple internal traumas. Their mother accompanied us to the place she never should have sent her children: the garbage bin which stands before the house. A crater, 20 minutes in diameter is the sole remainder of the missile, for which try hard as we may we find no reasonable objective. If any objective can be considered such when the victims are children.

Despite the fact that Israel justified today the bombing which eliminated Nizar Ryan, claiming he was one of the Hamas leaders who defended the suicide bombings strategy, with him an entire building was brought down, one of his wives, 4 of his children and four of their cousins as well as six other people who were passing by. There is no room allowed for innocence in the Gaza strip or perhaps, innocence has lost its meaning when confronted with incessant shooting from F-16 planes over one of the most densely populated refugee camps on the planet. Upon finishing this text, three more children have been killed in Khan Younis. And by the time you read this article, the 20 children who have died in the last 24 hours as confirmed by the ministry of health, will not be the last.

...