



Sanaa El Nahhal at the Rafah crossing

To Gaza with 56 boxes... back with her brother

Karl Schembri

SANAA El Nahhal, the Maltese-Palestinian who went to Gaza with 56 boxes of donations from Malta last Sunday, will return today on a flight from Cairo at around 2pm after being held by Egyptian police at the Rafah Crossing for three days. And her brother will join her later this week as the Maltese government will be issuing him with a visa.

Released at around 3.05pm Friday following intensive diplomatic talks from the Maltese Ambassador in Egypt, Giovanni Miceli, Sanaa managed to get into Gaza last Tuesday with her Palestinian passport after a

long day held at the border.

Contacted yesterday afternoon in Cairo, where she was accompanied by her brother Samir, El Nahhal was crying with joy at the Maltese Embassy where, after meeting the ambassador, she confirmed that a visa will be issued for him too.

"I'm really happy today because Samir will be joining me in Malta soon," she said. "I really wish to thank the Maltese ambassador for all the help. I'm so grateful to be returning back and to know that my brother will be coming too."

Ambassador Miceli confirmed that a tourist visa will be issued this week so that he could travel to Malta, probably by Thursday.

Samir is a medical doctor who graduated in Romania but gave up a career abroad to return to Gaza. For more

than four years, he could not get out and this will be his first trip abroad since his return.

Sanaa was reunited with her family in Gaza after four years. Only 15 boxes with medical aid were allowed in; the rest are stored in a garage of her relatives living on the Egyptian side of Rafah.

MaltaToday followed Sanaa until the border, but was refused entry into Gaza with her.

Describing her ordeal at the border crossing back into Egypt, Sanaa said: "I passed through the Palestinian side with no problems at all since most of the Palestinians that work there are related to me. However, when I arrived to the

Egyptian side, I had the biggest surprise of the entire trip, one that I wouldn't forget as long as I live. I was treated very badly and felt that I was not a human being. I was given no chance to talk and explain my situation. They only talked to people that they knew about from before, but the normal people like me were treated like they were nothing at all. No one wanted to listen to me. They sent me back to the bus in an arrogant way. They threw the two passports (Maltese and Palestinian) on the floor and I had to bend and pick them up. I got out of the bus again with an attempt to talk to them one more time but they refused and shouted.

"I returned to my family late that night. I will never in my whole life forget the humiliation I went through that day. It felt like I died a 1,000 times. My family tried to comfort me instead of me trying to comfort them. They stood by me while I was supposed to be the one standing by them and supporting them. I don't know how I slept that night. I was very worried."

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Egyptair and Medavia's director Abdulrazeeg Zmirli supported El Nahhal in getting her cargo to Rafah.

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The view from Rafah

Karl Schembri in Rafah | Photography by G. Calleja



Ahmed Durgham looking from a window in his house that was shattered by the bombings. At night, he used to seek shelter in the basement with his family and neighbours

FROM the rooftop of his impoverished apartment in Salah Ed Din Road, 24-year-old Jemaal Durgham could only watch helplessly as Israeli bombs fell on his relatives' houses across the border, just 300 metres away.

Fearing the worst for his wife and three-month-old daughter, who were unable to sleep at night as fighter planes bombarded Gaza, he left them at his father's house in the nearby town of El Arish until the Israeli forces withdrew.

"At night, it was unbearable. You can imagine how it was in Gaza," he tells me, as he shows me the dark basement where he slept with his cousin, Ahmed, during the war. Shrapnel reached here too, destroying the water tank of Jemaal's neighbour, and the blasts also shattered the windowpanes. And in what looks like the Egyptian government's attempt to tone down the tragedy, pieces of shrapnel kept by children are being confiscated by soldiers trooping the streets.

Jemaal's ramshackle street, stretching along the Rafah Crossing dividing Egypt and Gaza, covers the hundreds of tunnels from where civilians smuggle most of the everyday goods for the desperate Palestinians. Israelis charge that they are also used to smuggle rockets to Hamas, but the people here refute it adamantly.

On the Gaza side, most of the tunnels have been destroyed by Israeli forces, while Egyptian soldiers have sealed many of them from this end. Even

though they are a vital lifeline for war-stricken Palestinians, especially after the 22-day siege, the Egyptian forces are in cahoots with the Israelis and the American government in clamping down on anyone involved in the business. The owner of a grocery store has been imprisoned for over three years after being caught with a tunnel underneath his shop.

Indeed, just as the television sets assembled in a decrepit shop window here show Barack Obama giving his inaugu-

ral speech on Tuesday night, Egyptian soldiers are patrolling every metre of this street in the wake of the government's deal with Americans to repress the movement of goods and people.

Yet a handful of tunnels are still intact and are already being used to smuggle the badly needed provisions, especially fuel.

"It's good money for us, and the only lifeline for the Palestinians," said a man who by day sells takeaway falafel (typical



Karema Durgham (right) and her 11-year-old daughter Roaa Ahmed



Sanaa witnessing the extent of the destruction in Gaza



Emergency aid held at the gates of Gaza

Middle Eastern fast food, made from spiced chickpeas and vegetables served in pitta bread) from his garage.

Some of the tunnels are more sophisticated than others, with intricate pulley mechanisms, and people inside them pushing trolleys carrying all sorts of goods.

"Everything passes from there; mail, clothes, food, computers, goats, even buffaloes," said Selim, an Egyptian who owns a farm in Rafah. "On the other side, there's nothing. Anything they needed, we would send from here."

Solidarity repressed

Like Jemaal, Karema Kamel Durgham witnessed helplessly the devastation on the other side as her husband, a doctor working at the bombarded Al Quds hos-

pital, was in Gaza.

"They didn't even have fuel to run their ambulances," she told me. "Cars are running on cooking oil, killing everyone with cancer. A whole block of apartments right next to my husband's was razed to the ground. A man who was just getting out of his house ended up with his stomach blasted on the pavement. We were terrified here; you can just imagine there."

Yet when they organised a demonstration in solidarity with their Palestinian brothers, Egyptian soldiers were quickly dispatched on the street to repress the protest.

Even now, dozens of armoured vehicles and military vans carrying 30 soldiers each are stationed here 24 hours a day. During the war, they were afraid that Pales-

tinians would escape or somehow cross the border. Now, they monitor every movement, stopping cars and pedestrians at constant checkpoints.

"Last night I was driving my cousin's pickup and they stopped me and asked me for my driving licence," 16-year-old Ahmed said. "I don't have one but I told them I wasn't carrying it with me. They asked me for my identity card and when they realised I was Egyptian they let me go. They are only concerned with Palestinians so they don't care whether or not I have a driving licence."

It is not only the Palestinians that are being stopped. As we speak, a long queue of trucks carrying tonnes of emergency aid is held up at the border, as only medical aid and doctors are slowly trickling in the devastated Palestinian strip.

Tonnes of flour and thousands of gasoline-powered stoves have been sent back by the Egyptian border police. Trucks could be seen parked in the fields of Rafah and in the nearby seaport town of El Arish, as drivers and people manning the cargo dismantled their freight and separated medical supplies from other items that had to be sent back to their manufacturers: among them, boxes of food and 4,500 stoves carrying the logo of the Gaza Immediate Voluntary Relief Organisation.

They were sent back because, it is said, "they could be used by



Sanaa trying to convince Egyptian police to allow her into Gaza

Palestinians to make bombs for terrorist activities."

At the Egyptian hospitals here, where over 400 Palestinians have reportedly been admitted for intensive care, the situation even more chaotic.

Distressed Palestinians were being held from viewing their injured relatives when I visited the El Arish local hospital Monday night. I was allowed to view only one Palestinian, a 20-year-old in utter pain who, I was told, had lost a kidney and parts of his intestines because of the shrapnel and smouldering phosphorus.

The hospital director, Abu Hattab confirmed that no visits were being allowed given "the chaotic situation within the hospital wards".

Locals fear that hundreds of Palestinians have been transferred elsewhere unaccountably. The military hospital in Rafah, Al Askari, where Palestinians are also receiving intensive care, is totally out of bounds for relatives and journalists alike.

Smell the jasmine

Karema Durgham's 11-year-old daughter, Roaa Ahmed, misses her father and friends, and wants to return to Gaza. Her mother shows clear signs of anxious disapproval, and anyway, the borders are closed. Hamas wants total control of the flow; the Egyptian regime fears an influx of "Palestinian brothers" into the barren Sinai desert some 450km from Cairo.

"I'm a Palestinian girl. I don't want anything but to be just like any other girl in the world," Roaa says.

Unlike many other girls, she lives behind an arbitrary wall separating families in fear of their relatives' lives.

It is the same wall Hamas had blown up a year ago, after it took control of the Gaza Strip, prompting many Palestinians

to cross into Egypt until they were swept back by Egyptian forces 10 days later. Despite the show of force from the Egyptian side, no incidents were reported back then, as the Palestinians marched peacefully back into their land the size of Malta.

Now, a glimpse behind the heavily-guarded walls gives an impression of the devastation on the other side, with tents sprouting intermittently on the ruins that remain.

On the Egyptian side, children the age of Roaa and adults alike gather inside grimy internet cafes where computers seem to work against all odds. But rather than connecting them to the world, they are searching for an escape.

"Look, they're not even using the internet," Jemaal tells me sadly. "They are playing computer games."

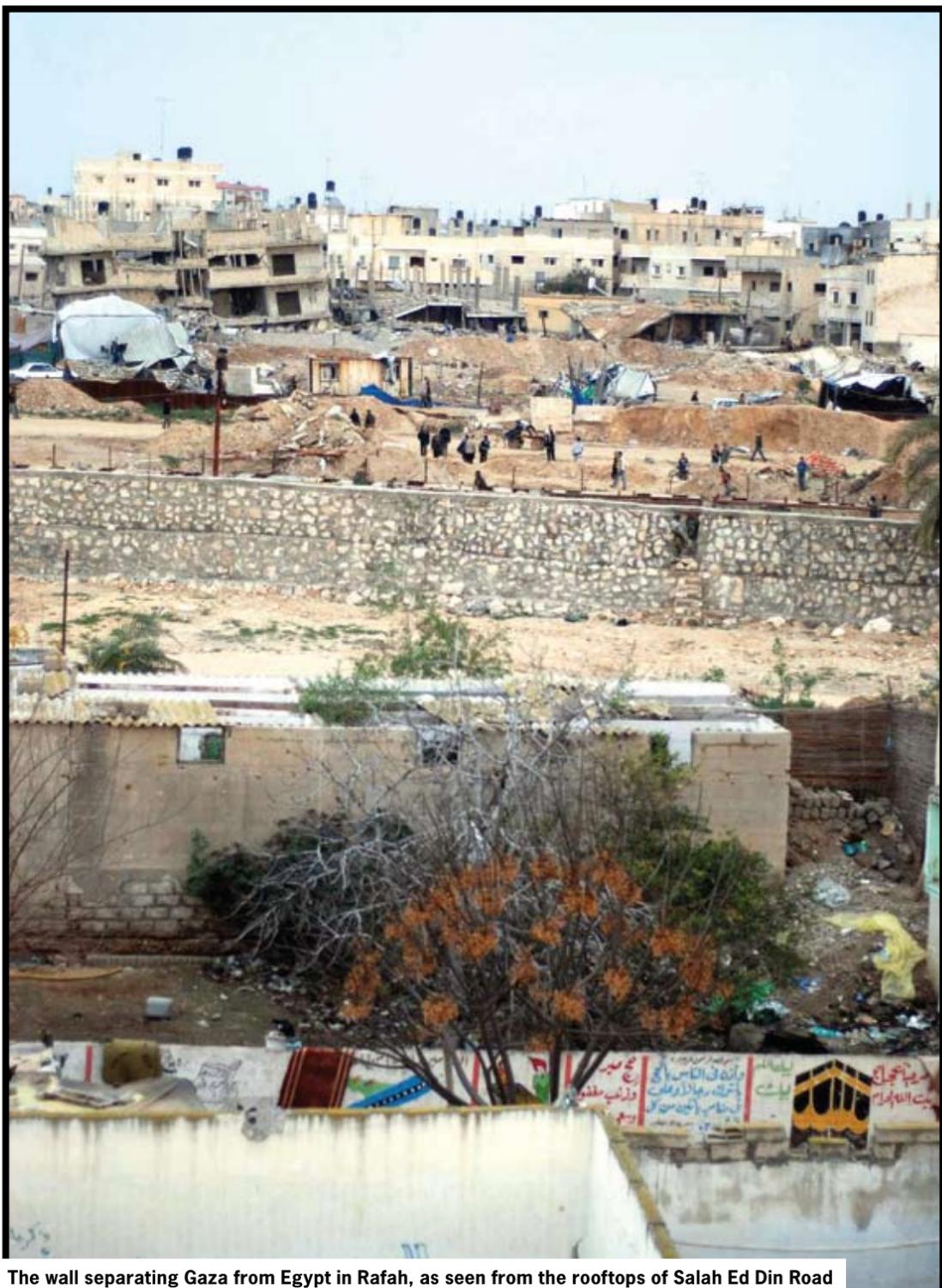
Jemaal is a hardworking, religious family man who juggles jobs to give a relatively decent life to his family. He spent two years in Zambia working up to 20 hours a day at a supermarket, thanks to which he could buy his pickup van and a nice car. He plans to go again, but not for now.

We walk cautiously in the dark alleyways in the shadow of the wall, metres away from an armed soldier walking towards us, while the photographer hides his camera.

I receive an SMS from a certain Jawwal. It turns out it's an automatic message from the Palestinian mobile phone company that caught me on its system, being so close to its transmitters.

"Marhaba. Smell the jasmine and taste the olives. Jawwal welcomes you to Palestine," the SMS read.

But really, from behind the wall, the olive trees looked burnt and moribund, and the smell in the air reeked of misery.



The wall separating Gaza from Egypt in Rafah, as seen from the rooftops of Salah Ed Din Road

