Gaza of broken hearts, grief, desperation but also resilience

When the war started on the 7th of October 2023, there was a total of 61 UN Volunteers serving in the State of Palestine, of which 18 were stationed in the Gaza Strip. Before the war, United Nations Volunteers (UNV) in the Gaza Strip provided humanitarian and development support to seven UN agencies. Even then, living conditions for Palestinians were bleak.

Six months on, the war continues unabated. Declared one of the deadliest conflicts in centuries on civilians and infrastructure, the evidence keeps multiplying on numerous cases of international humanitarian law violations, including against humanitarians and volunteers.

There are 21 UN Volunteers who were deployed after the war began. Of these, eight are stationed in Jordan, six in the State of Palestine, five in...

From the total number of these assignments, UNV is funding 13 utilizing its Special Voluntary Fund (SVF). Following the UN pillar of peace, this is a clear and strategic response to crisis and emergency efforts. The SVF-funded UN Volunteers support the Gaza crisis response, which involves humanitarian coordination, logistics, communications, information management and child protection. Several of them are deployed in the neighboring countries – Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon.

“UN Volunteers have stood on the frontlines of this war – steadfast but heartbroken and overwhelmed with what they witness around them. As we capture their despair through testimonials, at the same time, we are reminded of their resilience in the line of fire. Through their testimonials, we get a reflection of the horrors they face day in and day out – charting their voices over the past six months.

“When you experience a single disaster, it tends to become magnified in your mind. But when you experience consecutive disasters, your brain goes into shock. It goes blank and cannot process what is happening. Maybe after this war ends, we will process all this and recognize what we went through,” reported Wesal Abu Hamad on 10th October 2023. She is a UN Volunteer Humanitarian Field Support Assistant with OCHA and was stationed in Gaza when the war started.

Ahmad Nakhle is a UN Volunteer with UNDP Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People (PAPP). On 26th October 2023, he said, “Two days before the war began, I was serving as an on-site engineer overseeing the
UNDP project to restore the residential Palestine Tower. The building had suffered partial damage during the hostilities of May 2022. The restoration work was 90 per cent complete, and I was in the process of assuring homeowners they would move back to their homes soon. On 7 October, all my efforts and hopes to help people move back were shattered. The tower was destroyed. It had eighty-four apartments and stretched across fourteen floors."

The number of displaced people continues – presently at 1.7 million, which equates to 75 per cent of the entire Gaza Strip population.

OCHA estimates over 33,789 people have died and almost 76,000 are injured.

The Gaza Strip grapples not only with the dead and injured but with human catastrophes such as famine and disease, with almost 1.1 million being considered at the highest-risk category of famine.

Infrastructure has suffered a backbone break with the United Nations and the World Bank assessing around USD 18.5 billion to rebuild. The costs will inflate till the war continues.

"In this adversity, UNV is resolute in support of volunteerism."

Anas Hilles serves as an Environmental Coordinator with UNDP PAPP. He was part of a team that installed solar-powered desalination units in Khan Younis and Rafah areas in the Gaza Strip in December 2023. Anas reports the desperation he saw on the ground, “Our goal was to activate these stations by any means. Thankfully, we arrived safely, entered the stations, installed the final pieces, and got them running. When we arrived, the place was empty. When I turned on the water faucet, I was surprised to see children and people in the street coming out of their homes with containers to fill with water. It was a shocking moment; people were genuinely thirsty.”

Leen Al-Zinati is a UN Volunteer Gender and Education Support Field Officer with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Gaza. She recounted on the 29th of October 2023, “Since the start of the aggression, I have lost my cousin and an uncountable number of
friends and acquaintances. Despite this, I have not had the opportunity to grieve as I must remain strong and offer hope to those around me.”

Forcibly leaving your home in a war is traumatic. UN Volunteers such as Reema Alshurafa and Wesal Abu Hamad continued their volunteer assignments even after being evacuated from the Strip. On the 10th of January 2024, Reema Alshurafa, UN Volunteer Procurement Assistant with WHO sent her impressions, “After leaving my homeland, I was utterly exhausted. My body, weakened from prolonged fasting, was battered by fatigue. I endured persistent pain, stomach problems, and suffered from the presence of parasites and amoebic dysentery cysts. These ailments were a result of consuming unclean food, drinking contaminated water, and living in unsanitary conditions. Now, as I focus on recovery, my efforts are dedicated to supporting my colleagues who are working remotely. My primary concern is finding ways to effectively assist my family in Gaza, my country, and my people.”

Wesal Abu Hamad, UN Volunteer Humanitarian Field Support Assistant with OCHA reported from Egypt on the 8th of April 2024, “I have been in Cairo for a couple of weeks now, but I keep myself occupied with my work because I can’t imagine myself away from Gaza. I am trying to evacuate my family and then I will plan my return to Gaza. I live in constant disbelief, I can’t unpack the few personal belongings I brought with me in my laptop bag because emotionally I can’t settle, I can’t sleep on a bed, I want to remain in the temporary phase until I reunite with my family and then return to Gaza.”

“We leave you with this testimony from Asmaa Ma’rouf, UN Volunteer serving with UNDP. Her words though few echo deafening volumes. “Every day, I think that once the war is over, I will...’ but I never finish my thought. I do not know when you read this text, whether I will be alive or not.”
Please click on UNV's Special Voluntary Fund and Emergency Response to the crisis in Gaza for more information.

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