

BBC MEDIA ACTION

Atheer Gaza - The Disabled - Episode 13

Introduction:

Welcome to a new episode of “Lifeline Gaza”. This programme is broadcast especially for our listeners in Gaza on both BBC Arabic and Radio Alwan, and is presented to you by Dima Hamdan.

Lifeline Gaza provides you with information, and answers any of your questions that are related to humanitarian needs that have emerged due to the war. Those include schools, electricity, water, shelters and dealing with trauma, in addition to a variety of subjects that you yourselves ask to be discussed.

We also feature literary works presented by young men and women from Gaza, who carried on being creative during the war and were perhaps even inspired to write more by this situation.

Dear listeners in the Gaza Strip, this programme is for you. Therefore if you have any questions or suggestions, we urge you to contact us either via SMS or phone on the number is 0595011115. The number once again is 0595011115. This number receives text messages but does not receive phone calls.

You can also reach us by emailing us on the address: lifelinegaza@gmail.com

The subject of our episode today is about the disabled.

A woman’s voice: “We are currently suffering from a lack of rehabilitation devices in the Gaza Strip. The formerly available devices are not sufficient to cover the needs. We are still waiting for devices to arrive from the West Bank”

Dima: Nesreen Maisaak is the integration and transformation officer at Handicap International. She spoke to us about the services provided by the organisation, in addition to the difficulties they face in helping the disabled in the current situation. According to official statistics, the number of disabled in the Gaza Strip was 38,000 before the onset of the war. A number that has no doubt increased after the Israeli bombing which caused thousands of injuries.

In a moment we will be listening to Nesreen Maisak who provides practical information about the centres that the disabled can turn to for help. But let us first listen to Mohammad Al-Sawafeeri’s report who met with individuals whose personal disabilities did not deter them from helping others.

Mohammed: None of the Gaza Strip citizens were spared the dire effects of the last war, as the bombing and damage affected everyone equally. Nonetheless some groups suffered more than others and those suffering from disabilities were amongst them. Their movement became difficult, yet their physical disability did not stop individuals like Ibraheem Raheem and Issam Al-Shawwa from volunteering to help the displaced and homeless in shelters:

Male voice 1: The war was catastrophic for the Palestinian people, especially for those suffering from disabilities. And since I am a young Palestinian man with disability, I found movement very difficult. This issue inspired us to volunteer in the UNRWA shelters. The situation was truly miserable, and there are stories amongst the displaced of real people with disabilities not being able to evacuate their homes which led to their death. This is especially true for those suffering from deafness as they could not hear the sound of the rockets and bombing.

Mohammad: As for Issam, his situation was no better. Issam and his 3 sisters are disabled and he had to think of a way to help them out in case their house was bombed.

Issam: We have 3 people with disability in our house. Two of them are my sisters who are really scared. I can't imagine how, if God forbid our house was bombed, would all 4 of us manage to get out, especially that my father works as a paramedic for the Red Crescent and he was not at home 90% of the time.

Mohammed: Now that the war has calmed down, various organisations are working night and day to tend to the needs of the disabled.

Haneen Al-Sammak is the project director of Diaconia:

Haneen: Many of the disabled, especially those from the Shaja`iya neighbourhood fled and left their aid devices like their wheelchairs, crutches, medical mattresses and raised toilet seats behind. So we are now trying to find providers of wheelchairs and toilet seats. The first thing the disabled think of is how to be part of society, so we thought of ways to allow them to access their rights, because they have rights that the state is responsible for. Erm... There is still a shortage... We still need aid devices, there aren't enough, especially wheelchairs, but who... We couldn't reach those who fled to their parents' and relatives', they were not present at schools. We couldn't reach them.

Mohammad: Some of the local organisations opened their doors for subscription all around the Gaza strip, to help the disabled in an attempt to compensate them for some of their losses during the war.

Dima: That was Mohammad Al-Sawafeeri's report.

The Ministry of Social Affairs is currently conducting a field mission to evaluate the material needs of the disabled, especially with regards to hearing aids and mobility scooters. Mahmood Moshtaha met with Mrs. I`timad Al-Tarshawi, general director of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation at the Ministry of Social Affairs and asked her about the services provided by the ministry after the war.

I`timad: In the first place we provide a new aid device to the disabled who have lost their aid devices. We also provide them with food aid and other aid, similarly to what we provide to the families affected by war. All of that is done through the aid programme of the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Mahmood: How do you integrate the disabled back into the society after the Israeli attack on Gaza and what are the types of disabilities that you help?

I`timad: The Ministry of Social Affairs aims to help all types of disabilities, hence we have invited the disabled to register with us. We need more and more aid, especially [mobility] scooters, as there is a huge lack in them. Many people have lost their scooters, which used to enable them not only to move, but to also integrate within the society. The aid devices that the ministry provides play a big role in integrating the disabled in the society.

Mahmood: Does the Ministry receive complaints from the disabled?

I`timad: Yes, on a daily basis we have disabled people coming to us and submitting their complaints. They usually have specific needs or they have lost their devices or that nobody fulfilled their....They made a requested which was not heard. We accept all the complaints that we receive and we study them thoroughly and we have field researchers who work for the different directorates of the ministry who play a positive role. They go from the directorates to the places where the people are present and try to study and understand their circumstances, and then we take the right decisions to satisfy them and provide them with suitable devices.

Dima: That was Mrs. I`timad Al-Tarshawi from the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Dear listeners, how do you rate the ministry's current performance in serving the disabled? Do share your views with us on Lifeline Gaza.

You are listening to Lifeline Gaza on BBC Arabic and we invite you to share your questions and views through text messages on number 0595011115

Or you can write to us on the email: lifelinegaza@gmail.com

Also, don't forget to visit our Facebook page called: Lifeline Gaza

Let us return now to the subject of today's episode which is people with disabilities. Let's listen to an interview with Nesreen Maisaak, integration and transformation officer at

Handicap International speaking about the services the organisation provides. The interview is conducted by colleague Madeline Shaqaleih:

Nesreen: Besides their disabilities, many of the disabled have lost their main guardians and many of them fled their homes, or even lost their homes. At the same time many of the integration services that they used to receive were put on hold due to the aggression.

Madeline: What kind of help did you provide during the war?

Nesreen: The help includes integration services, aid devices like chairs and crutches. In addition to nursing, wound dressings and the distribution of nappies to the disabled; both children and adults alike. After the aggression we also worked with the wounded who are in danger of developing disabilities after the war.

Madeline: The disabled currently have certain needs and demands that you cannot meet?

Nesreen: The disabled are in constant need of services, but what we cannot provide at the moment, or rather what we are anticipating to be able to provide in the next stage is the aid devices. We have a huge shortage of aid devices in the Gaza Strip and the devices that were present before are not sufficient to cover the demands. Therefore we are waiting for the arrival of devices from the West Bank.

Madeline: How can those who have disabled people in their homes stay in touch with you and how can you reach them?

Nesreen: During the period of displacement we visited almost all the shelters in Gaza and we worked hard to gather information about the disabled people who were present in the shelters. We are currently in touch with them and are providing them with our services. Those suffering from disabilities or their relatives can reach us by contacting our project partners, like the Baitona for Community and Development in the North of the Strip, Palestine Avenir for Childhood Foundation; the cerebral palsy centre in Gaza city, The National Society for Rehabilitation in Khan Younes and Al-Wusta and the Society of Physically Handicapped People in Rafah.

That was Nesreen Maisak talking to our colleague Madeline Shaqaleih. We read to you again the list of centres that provide support and treatment to those with special disabilities. And they are:

- Baitona for Community and Development in the North of the Strip
- Palestine Avenir for Childhood Foundation; the cerebral palsy centre in Gaza city
- The National Society for Rehabilitation in Khan Younes and Al-Wusta
- Society of Physically Handicapped People in Rafah

Dear listeners, our colleague Mohammad Al-Sawafeeri visited the Peace Club for the Disabled in preparation for this episode, where he met a young woman called Abeer Al-Herakli from Al-Shaja`iya quarter. She told him about her experience during the war and how she escaped death despite her inability to walk. Before we listen to Abeer's story, we would like to warn our listeners that some of the details of the story are more painful than it is customary to broadcast on Lifeline Gaza:

Abeer: For starters I am a very active person. I am active in many fields, especially in many institutions and associations and I am an athlete at the Peace Club. My daily life was all about university and the club and I used to take part in many activities. But when the war started I found it very difficult to go out, see people and carry on with my daily life as usual. Until they started sending us warning to evacuate our houses. They would tell us to flee Al-Shaja`iya quarter. The massacre happened on a Sunday. Sunday night was truly terrifying. Missiles were falling randomly on houses. It was so scary. We would hear the screams of those who were injured from our neighbours, then we would hear the screaming and wailing slowly subside every our. People were dying. At day break my father opened the door to see the people who were going out into the street; whether they are going out. So he said "get ready to go out". But while he was talking to us missiles started falling on the people who were fleeing their homes. He opened the door again and saw that the people who were fleeing were torn to pieces. So he went in and was irresolute whether we should stay indoors or go out. We are stuck between two evils: If we go out we will be targeted on the streets, and if we stay in our houses they will target the houses because the rockets were falling randomly on buildings. So he came back and said "Recite the Shahada and go out". There was no hope, we had to leave. So all of my sisters left and forgot that I am disabled and I will need to be carried or that I will find it difficult to go out. They were being sweet, as they say, so all of them went out and ran. So I stayed with my mother and father in the house. My father has health problems so he couldn't carry me. Besides, he's old and so is my mother. I was really worried about my parents because they were delayed because of me and I didn't want anything to happen to them because of me. I never said why do I have a disability, or why can't I walk, except on the day of the massacre. I had a mobility scooter that my father prepared for me and told me to get on it and run away. I got on it although it's dangerous to do so, but when I saw the people in pieces on the ground and the trees were all fallen on the ground I stood dumbstruck and not knowing what to do. Shall I go ahead or go back? So I stood there and suddenly a rocket came from behind me, and its heat, God knows whether it was a missile or a rocket from a drone, I don't know, but the sound was terrifying. There was dust and smoke and I flew off the scooter and fell amongst the corpses. I started saying the shahada and my father was looking for me. He saw my scooter was empty so he thought I might have died. After the situation calmed down he came next to me and he couldn't carry me. So I started to crawl in order to reach my scooter, but they fired another missile. It was then that I discovered I was injured. I was injured at that moment and a young man, a stranger, came and carried me. He told my

father to run, that he would carry me. So we went to Al-Shifa hospital. There they told us that the hospital could be targeted so they took us to the UNRWA schools. We went there, where the shelters were...to the UNRWA schools. At that moment I didn't have crutches or a scooter or a wheelchair. They came after 10 days from the organisation of Mrs. Haneen Al-Sammak, and she got me a wheelchair. So I started to sit a bit by the classroom door but I didn't go much to the school playground. I wish somebody would get me a mobility scooter because my life is now miserable. I can't live without a mobility scooter. What can I do when I want to commute? Our financial situation isn't that good, it's actually difficult. I sometimes sell the cans that we were given as aid at schools. I sell them to pay for my travel expenses to go change the injury dressing because I lost the scooter. When I lost my scooter it felt like I lost a family member. All the organisations know who Abeer is and how I'm active. Everyone knows that I lost my scooter, but unfortunately when I say that I want a scooter they tell me "inshalla", which actually means you have to wait. In Gaza inshalla now means that one has to wait.

Dima: This was Abeer Al-Herakli from the Shaja`iya neighbourhood and her painful account of the war.

And with this we come to the end of our episode of Lifeline Gaza, a BBC Media Action production.

This episode will be broadcast again on BBC Arabic tomorrow at 9:30pm Gaza time and you can also listen to it on Alwan Radio at 11am and at 6pm.

You were accompanied by Dima Hamdan. And until we meet in a next episode, we wish you and your loved ones to be safe wherever you are.