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The Gaza I Know

by NANCY MURRAY

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For most Americans, the Gaza Strip is, at best, unknown territory. At worst, it is a hostile land whose "terrorist infrastructure" must be dismantled, no matter what the cost to its million and a half residents.

The Gaza I have been visiting for the past twenty-one years bears little relation to the dehumanizing imagery to which it has been reduced by the mainstream media. The Gaza I know is home to friends and strangers who are as welcoming and humane as they are resilient and determined to achieve their freedom. They have maintained their humanity despite enduring a brutal forty-two-year-old Israeli occupation that has cost them the destruction of their homes, land, economy and future and the loss of more than 4,000 lives since the dawn of the twenty-first century.

For the past two and a half years, this spit of sand--just twenty-five miles long and a few miles wide--has been virtually a closed prison. Since June 2007 Israel's blockade has prevented the entry of all but a handful of basic items, and the exit of patients who urgently need medical treatment and students with scholarships to study abroad. Then, a year ago, came the "shock and awe" of Israel's "Operation Cast Lead," intended as a knockout blow not just to the crude rockets fired from Gaza but to its life-sustaining infrastructure and the will of its people to resist.

A month ago, I finally obtained permission from the Israeli military to cross into Gaza to visit therapy programs for traumatized children. Half of the Gaza Strip's 1.5 million inhabitants are children, and many have not emotionally recovered from Israel's military attacks.

And how could they? They are still living in the ruins of war. Blasted buildings tilt dangerously over streets. Unexploded ordnance lurks beneath concrete rubble. Israel, with the blessing of the United States, has prevented reconstruction materials and heavy machinery from entering the Gaza Strip - and just about everything else.

Aid agencies have at the ready the equipment needed to fix the destroyed sewage and waste water systems - but it is not permitted to enter. And so each day up to 80 million liters of untreated sewage spill into the Mediterranean and leach into the aquifer. Thousands of babies have "blue baby syndrome" and risk dying of nitrate poisoning; fish are dead; and the long sandy beaches--which had been the sole place of recreation in one of the most densely crowded places on earth --are now off limits.

The hundreds of dangerous, hand-hewn tunnels into Egypt through which Gazans haul bottled water, food and other supplies are at present a lifeline. So it is with a sinking heart that I read that Egypt, at the urging of Israel and the United States, is installing metal sheets under the ground to "curb smuggling."

I wonder how the head of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, John Ging, is digesting this latest calamitous news. When I met with him in November he told me that hope for tomorrow is just about gone. "We have run out of words to describe how bad it is here. Things are moving rapidly in the

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wrong direction. The best help we can get is to lift the siege and to begin to deal with human beings on a humane and legal basis."

In late December, to mark the first anniversary of Israel's war, some 1,200 internationals from forty-two countries will be doing what they can to get things moving in the right direction. They intend to enter Gaza from Egypt to participate in the Gaza Freedom March. Marchers include an 85-year-old American Holocaust survivor, Hedy Epstein, the acclaimed writer Alice Walker, civil rights movement veterans, Ronnie Kasrils, a leader of the South African liberation struggle and a substantial delegation from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

Invoking the spirit of Gandhi's Salt March and the Civil Rights Movement, these internationals of conscience will encounter the Gaza I know - the vibrant civil society of children, students and teachers, refugee groups and women's organizations, doctors and therapists, farmers and fishermen, musicians and dancers who are planning a tremendous welcome.

Together they will take part in cultural and solidarity activities. Then, on New Year's Eve, they will call for an end to the blockade in a massive march toward the Erez Crossing with Israel, as Israeli solidarity marchers converge on the other side.

Simultaneously, around the globe there will be "end the siege" actions demanding that the prison doors be opened. The lives of Gaza's babies hang in the balance.

To find out more, go to [Gaza Freedom March](#).

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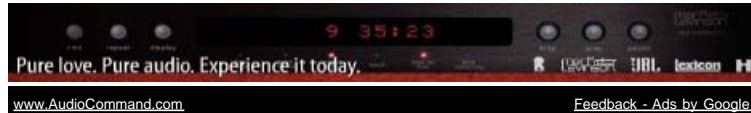
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About Nancy Murray

Nancy Murray is president of the Gaza Mental Health Foundation and a member of the international steering committee of the Gaza Freedom March. [more...](#)

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