

Gaza: Inside the world's biggest prison

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Evidence is mounting that the Israeli defence forces used the Gaza assault as a testing ground for new, horrific weapons that have confounded doctors' attempts to save the wounded.

THERE WERE MANY ways to die during the Israeli offensive on Gaza.

From their hospital beds at Gaza's Shifa Hospital, Atallah Saad, 13, and Yussef Salem, 17, told me how "zananas" – remotely piloted drones that fire missiles – wounded them and killed Atallah's mother and pregnant sister-in-law, and two of Yussef's school friends. The drones were given the nickname because they make a loud z-z-z-z-z sound. But the most shocking thing about them is that an Israeli operator watches his target – in these cases, all civilians – through a surveillance camera before launching the missile. Death by remote control.

White phosphorous was another, much publicised means of death. Each M82581 artillery shell, manufactured by General Dynamics in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, bears the initials PB. And each of the 155mm shells contains 116 felt wafers soaked in phosphorus, which ignites on contact with oxygen. The phosphorous makes the white jellyfish-shaped clouds seen on television during the December 27th-January 17th Israeli offensive. It provides cover for advancing troops, but it also burns houses and people. If one of the felt pads lands on your skin, it burns until all the fuel is consumed, creating deep, wide, chemical burns, often to the bone.

Dr Nafiz Abu Shabaan pulls a plastic bag from under his desk. It is filled with white phosphorous, buried in sand. The brown pieces look like dog dirt, and re-ignite if broken open. Mahmoud al Jamal, 18, sits in the doctor's office, his right ear congealed, his fingers and part of his chest eaten away by white phosphorous. The unsightly wounds make him look like a leper.

Al Jamal was walking at dawn when he saw the white jellyfish in the sky. "Everything was set on fire around me. I felt my body burning. I fell down and I asked the man lying next to me to help me, but he was dead. Then I lost consciousness." Al Jamal's brother later told him how smoke poured from his body in the ambulance on the way to the hospital.

The Israeli's use of white phosphorous is amply documented. Israel says it is legal, but human-rights groups say its use in civilian areas might constitute a war crime. Dr Abu Shabaan is more concerned by evidence of new, mysterious weapons and appeals for an impartial international investigation into Israel's use of new weapons.

"We've seen many, many cases of amputation – like a cauterised wound, with no bleeding,"

he recounts.

“Some have minor chest injuries, but the X-rays show nothing and they die suddenly, without explanation.”

Palestinian and foreign doctors who’ have treated the war-wounded at Shifa suspect the injuries may be caused by Dense Inert Metal Explosive, also known as Focus Lethality Munition, a weapon invented through Israeli-American cooperation.

“We are guinea pigs to the Americans and Israelis,” says Dr Abu Shabaan. “The Americans give the Israelis new weapons, and they try them out on us.”

“They are definitely testing weapons on us,” says Dr Sobhi Skaik, a member of the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh and the head of the surgery department at Shifa. “The amount of damage done by these weapons is not commensurate to the wounds. We found computer chips, magnetic pieces and transistors in wounds. Sometimes there are only minute pin-point punctures to the abdomen and chest, but you see huge damage to internal organs. One patient had his liver burned black, as if it had been grilled. We think there must be something embedded in the human body that is releasing poison and killing.”

YET FOR ALL the high-tech and Frankenstein weaponry, perhaps Israel’s most vicious arm against the Palestinians has been “al-hissar”, the siege, imposed on the Gaza Strip 19 months ago when Hamas, after winning a democratic election that the world refused to recognise, seized power from the Fatah Palestinian Authority.

The world turned a blind eye as Gazans languished in the world’s biggest prison, unable to travel, import, export or interact with anyone or anything beyond their borders. And the world largely ignored the rockets Hamas fired in anger and frustration from within the siege.

As a result of this dual negligence the conflict exploded, killing 13 Israelis and 1,300 Palestinians.

The siege was one reason casualties were so high in the three-week war, says Fred Abrahams of Human Rights Watch. With the Israeli and Egyptian borders closed, “It wasn’t possible for Gazans to escape. The only way to get out was on a stretcher.”

For 19 months, Gaza has endured shortages of fuel, food, medicine and building materials. The Palestinians suffer the additional humiliation of using their tormentors’ currency, but two months ago the Israeli government cut the supply of shekels, creating a severe cash shortage. Fayad Salam, the prime minister of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, was forced to plea with the Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert.

There were long queues at ATMs in Gaza City this week, but no matter how much they have in salary or savings, cash is rationed and Palestinians can withdraw only 1,000 Israeli shekels per month. “If the Israelis could deprive us of air, they would do it,” says a Palestinian doctor.

The siege of Gaza lies at the heart of the conflict. “If the Israelis want the war to end, they must open all the borders and end the siege,” says Hamas government spokesman Tahir al-Nounou. “Because the siege is war; the siege is killing our people.”

The only lifeline for Gaza are some 1,300 tunnels beneath the Gaza-Egyptian border. It costs \$10,000 (€7,800) to dig a tunnel. The best tunnels are bored with sophisticated machines that compress earthen walls so no give-away sand appears outside. Some have railway tracks and electricity, and the tunnels are a lucrative business for Gazans and Egyptians. Because Hamas is believed to import weapons through the tunnels, Israel carpet-bombed them during the offensive. Yet only an estimated 400 were destroyed, and by mid-week the tunnels were again open. Huge plastic cubes in metal frames, holding petrol, appeared on the pavements of Gaza City.

But the return to a semblance of normality cannot efface the three-week nightmare. Whole families were wiped out. Abu Mohamed Balousha, who lost five daughters, and the Samounis of Zeitoun, where a four-year-old boy was the only survivor in a family of 30, have become causes célèbres.

Everyone has a worst memory. For ambulance driver Hathem Saleh, it was desperate telephone calls from the wounded. "When you have been talking to him on the phone and you cannot reach him because the Israeli tank will hit you - it happened to me many times . . . I could hear cries and the Israelis were shooting at us."

Dr Mahmoud al Khozendar, a chest physician, tells of a colleague whose Russian wife was cut in half when an Israeli missile hit their home. It also killed their six-month-old child. "He took the two parts of his wife and put her on the bed with the baby. He escaped with a wounded son and daughter, and asked the Red Crescent to go back for the bodies."

At Shifa, al Khozendar had a room full of limbs he could not match with bodies, and one body with two heads. "Most of the bodies were buried without names," he says.

THERE WERE MANY ways to die during the Israeli offensive on Gaza. Perhaps the greatest number killed were crushed to death when the Israelis fired heavy tank artillery at their houses. Halima Radwan, 60, seemed particularly symbolic to me. Radwan was a young woman when she and her family fled from Israel in the 1967 war. She spent her life as a wandering Palestinian, moving to Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt. In 1996, in the glory days when Gaza had an airport and Palestinians carried passports, she and her husband Ahmad, a PLO official, decided to move back to "Palestine". They built a five-bedroom villa in the Abed Rabbo district of Gaza. A month before the offensive, they paid off their debts and celebrated.

Maher Radwan, 36, is Halima and Ahmad's only son and a mechanical engineer with the Palestinian Authority. He, his wife and children lived with his parents. "Before the ground offensive started, I decided to take my wife and children further from the border," Maher recounts in front of the ruined villa. "I begged my parents to come with us, but they said 'No, we are old. The Israelis won't harm us'."

On January 6th, an Israeli tank fired a shell at the Radwans' house. Ahmad was wounded in the head and walked out with a white flag. He begged the Israelis to allow the Red Crescent to rescue his wife Halima, who was buried alive in her kitchen. The Israelis said no. Halima lived for four days under the debris of her house, which the Israelis then dynamited.

"They knew she was there and they saw her, because they searched the house before they destroyed it," says Maher.

As soon as the ceasefire took effect last Sunday, he went with friends and relatives to dig his mother out. "I had the tiniest hope she might still be alive." But Halima's legs, shoulder and head had been crushed by concrete.

Broken porcelain, a framed verse from the Koran and a piece of plaster with Hebrew writing by the Israeli soldiers are scattered in the ruins of the Radwan family home. The pigeons they raised have returned to roost on the broken roof. Maher Radwan's neighbours say there can be no peace with the Israelis who did this. But Maher is more sad than angry. Peace might still be possible, he says, "if only there were wise Israeli people".

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