

We just re-entered Gaza yesterday; this is the second time Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility has been here with a medical delegation since last summer's Israeli Military assault here. It is our tenth medical delegation overall since 2009.

This past July-August 2014 assault killed about 2200 Gazans, wounded over 11,000 people, destroyed over 14,000 homes, displaced initially about half a million people and left about 100,000 people homeless.

When we last entered 3 months later in November 2014, very little had been accomplished in terms of reconstruction. The international community had pledged between \$5 and \$6 billion in reconstruction aid, but very little had made it into Gaza. This delay has been due mostly to onerous restrictions by Israel, who keeps the entire Strip's population hostage to its whims and under siege. "The Israelis control every aspect of our lives," we are told. This siege has been going on in its harshest forms for over 8 years now, but in reality, for a much longer period than that. The Israeli authorities keep squeezing more water out of a turnip, as if this might somehow lead to a better future. But the turnip keeps growing. The population of Gaza is about 1.8 million souls now. What we all know from talking to our colleagues here, Gaza does not need more aid, as much as it needs its freedom.

Bokra Bokra Mish Mish

This is a famous Palestinian saying, which loosely translates into "tomorrow tomorrow never comes". In spite of the reconstruction conference in Cairo at the end of last summer's conflict attended by US Secretary of State John Kerry and others, very little has been transformed. It is deja vu all over again. Palestinians have had a bad experience previously and they know what to expect in spite of all the empty promises from the politicians. A similar conference attended by the previous US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the Egyptian resort town of Sharm El Sheikh in 2009 at the end of the Israeli assault called Cast Lead didn't lead to many tangible results either. Locals here do not believe that this time will be any different. "We are all alone without the support of the world".

The 25 years of so-called "Peace Process" has really become a Piece Process which tears Palestine into tiny little pieces: a series of endless bad faith negotiations which have been a mask for entrenching the mantle of Apartheid. Before last summer, 69% of the people in Gaza were dependent on humanitarian assistance. Now that figure hovers at around 80 %. People are still living in the streets and in ramshackle shelters scattered all over the strip. This past winter, several young children died of hypothermia directly related to exposure to the elements when the cold winter rains came.

By November of last year, 60,000 of the original 100,000 homeless remained so, and it is not much better today.. Those no longer considered homeless included families who have been absorbed by extended families and are living in overcrowded conditions. UN schools are being used to house homeless, which puts additional stress on the existing UN schools, which now must go from double shifting to triple shifting in order to meet educational demand for all the

students.

According to Dr. Yasser Jamaï, director of Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, there has been no improvement in the political, environmental or the reconstruction situation. Now with the re-election of Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu in Israel last week, most believe that it is only a matter of time before Gaza is under attack again.

In spite of all this, Dr. Yasser, who lost many close family members last summer says, "if you survive the trauma, it makes you stronger, it gives you more power to cope with the hopeless situation." Close family bonds and the power of religion keeps this society together he adds.

We are told by many of our friends in Gaza, that our visit and our direct efforts to empower medical services here do give them some hope. We certainly hope so.

During this next week, we will compare with what we witnessed in November. We will see what has changed what remains the same and where help from the outside world might make a difference..