

No safe place in Rafah
By Mohammed Joudeh
Jan. 8 – 6 p.m. local time

Mohammed Joudeh is the Safety Coordinator on the NGO Safety Project, which provides safety information for aid agencies working in Gaza.

It's now 6:00 pm, and the streets and neighbourhoods are totally empty of any creature. My neighbourhood has been reduced to rows of abandoned homes with open windows - some windows have been removed, to avoid flying glass if they shatter during a bombing. During the day, there were many air raids that destroyed several homes. Shrapnel fell very close to our home.

In the morning, the grocery shops were totally empty. The only things on the shelves were hygiene materials. The bakeries were all closed. There is no wheat grain. Some men were walking around, trying to find some wheat; they were disappointed that UNRWA has suspended operations in Gaza.

A lot of children, cousins, and relatives are crowded in my home. My disabled grandfather and my disabled grandmother are here, forced to move from their home in Al Barazil camp on the Egyptian border, after receiving warnings about the bombings. Both of them are sitting with terrified eyes, watching and waiting. My wife is glued to me, seeking some warmth and protection. She is afraid of what's going to come next.

A critical discussion rose up among the adults in my house; should we leave, and try to find a safer place in Rafah, or stay home, since there is no safe place in Rafah? The street is a potential target, the mosque is a potential target – in every neighborhood there is an unknown potential target.

The discussion was postponed for dinner – some jam and white cheese, same as breakfast. In comparison, lunch was fabulous – canned meat! Trust me, canned meat is a very delicious meal when you don't have any cooking gas or electricity. We don't even have kerosene to light my grandmother's lantern, the one that she used 30 years ago. We found it in the attic at the beginning of this conflict, covered with enough dust to plaster a wall.

Oh, I miss electricity... There is no water, no food in Rafah. I turn off my mobile phone most of the time, to save the battery life. I only open it when necessary. A lot of people called, asking about us. Some relatives called to propose that we go live with them. That was so sweet of them, but they have a very small and crowded house – my whole family could not fit. I have so many questions: What to do? Where to go?

The F-16s are flying overhead again. The children are glued to their mothers, the cat crawled under my grandfather's blanket, and the adults are waiting for the next bomb, the one that will fall down on the house to destroy it.

Now it's a very scary, dark night. We are all waiting for the morning and sunshine; some light will make us feel safer. The children hate the dark. It makes them frightened, especially when the bombs fall unseen in the darkness.

I have to decide what to do; I called a friend, who moved with his family to one of the UNRWA schools in Rafah, to decide whether to leave or stay home. I felt depressed after calling him. He complained about the cold, lack of electricity, bad food, crowds, and the most important thing – it's not safe there, either.

Finally, I made my decision. We will stay home. There is no safe place in Rafah.
-end-