

## **“Welcome to Gaza”**

### **Emergency Pedagogy Crisis Intervention in the Ruins of Gaza**

The pedagogical emergency aid for psycho-traumatised children in Gaza has begun. A crisis intervention team from the Friends of Waldorf Education worked for four days in the ruins of Gaza, to assist traumatised children in a pedagogical acute aid mission with methods from Waldorf-pedagogy. The emergency crisis intervention, which was suggested by Israeli friends, is motivated exclusively by humanitarian reasons.

### **Gaza sinks into misery and despair**

Wadi is an 18 month old boy. He belongs to the Samouni-Clan—an over 100 person extended family of simple rural origins, which sadly came to public attention. Children and adults of the family reported to us: “During the invasion by Israeli troops on January 27<sup>th</sup>/28<sup>th</sup>, 2009 in Zeidoun [a south-eastern city district of Gaza-City] the clan was commanded to assemble in a house. Then the house was shot at from a helicopter. 36 family members, many of them children, died. For four days the rescue workers of the Red Crescent were prevented from caring for the injured and burying the dead. Wadi lay next to his dead mother during this time. He had neither food nor water. From time to time soldiers would pour a bucket of cold water on him. Since then Wadi has fallen silent. His empty gaze no longer fixes on anything. With dark eyes he stares apathetically at the world. His father lost his arm and now lies in an Egyptian military hospital. According to his own account Shaban, 9 years old, too was forced to watch helplessly as his parents and all of his siblings were shot dead by soldiers. We met both children on the rubble of their former home right next to a sign with the words: “Welcome to Gaza”.

During the military offensive in the Gaza Strip, which lasted over three weeks, 1,415 people were killed and about 5,500 injured according to the health department of Gaza. The UN believes half of the victims were civilians. The medical care of the population has fallen apart due to military attacks and air-tight blockading of the Gaza Strip. Water and power supply as well as the supply of food and relief goods are also largely damaged or destroyed. Everything necessary for survival must be smuggled through the approximately 2,000 illegal tunnels on the border to Egypt. The diggers are mostly teenagers who earn about 100 Sheckel per meter. Many people live in the tunnel system since the start of the daily bombardments, to find protection of because their homes were destroyed

Over 22,000 houses in Gaza were made uninhabitable by the attacks. Their residents now live mostly on the rubble or in provisional tent cities. From morning till evening one can hear machine guns along the coast. Small agile military boats hunt fisher bunts in an attempt to stop weapon smugglers. Already before the start of the military conflict, 80% of the population of Gaza lived under the poverty line set by the UN. Now they freeze and starve. “It is heart-breaking, it is shocking, words fail me:” this is how UN-General Secretary Ban Ki Moon formulated his impressions of the crisis region during his visit there.<sup>1</sup>

### **In the Forecourt of Hell**

Since the beginning of the bloody conflict on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008, a pressing lack of space and, to western eyes, chaotic hustle dominate in the central Al Shifa Hospital in Gaza-City. Patients receive emergency medical care everywhere in the overcrowded hallways, CPR is performed, and open wounds treated. Now victims of the daily missile attacks are constantly being brought in too. The

medical personal, who have performed superhuman efforts in the last weeks, are worn down and exhausted. The doctors, who have much experience with war injuries, have been confronted with injuries they have never seen before. Dr. Mads Gilbert, a Norwegian ER doctor who works in the Al Shifa Hospital, reported seeing clear evidence “that the Israelis are using a new kind of highly explosive weapons, called DIME (Dense Inert Metal Explosive), which is produced with tungsten alloy”.<sup>2</sup> The range of DIME is said to be around 10 meters and its detonation subsides very quickly. The people though, who are hit by the explosion, melt or are cut-up as if by a scalpel. The grenades explode about 30 cm above the ground. This would explain the razor sharp amputations of adults’ limbs and the kind of injuries to the abdomen and heads of children, which were before never seen in war. “I treated a 10 year old boy. His entire chest was filled with bomb fragments. In his lap laid the amputated leg of another person (...) he died under our hands”.<sup>3</sup> Those who survive have an increased risk of developing cancer. In front of the Al Shifa hospital stand the wreckage of destroyed Red Crescent ambulances. Next to them stands a tent with the remains of grenades and an exhibition of pictures of everyday life in Al Shifa Hospital from the past few weeks. Those who enter the tent, come into the forecourt of hell. Doctor Mads Gilbert commented: “What is happening in Gaza here right now goes against international law, it is against humanity, and I believe that it goes against what it means to be a decent human being!”.<sup>4</sup>

### **Victims become Offenders – Pedagogical Emergency Aid as Anti-Terror Prevention**

Over half of the 1,5 million people living in Palestine are under 15 years old. The suffering of the children in Gaza can hardly be put into words. Countless children have been killed, wounded, or were exposed powerlessly to the inferno of death and destruction. Many have been psycho-traumatised by their terrible experiences and urgently require aid.

### **Psychotraumatata**

Psychotraumatata develop in specific phases. After the “shock experience” of the catastrophe and a one to two day long “acute phase” comes a period which can last four to eight weeks depending on the individual. In this time, diverse symptoms can appear as “post-traumatic stress reactions”: psycho-somatic complaints of all kinds, concentration difficulties, fears, panic attacks, nightmares, sleeping disorders, rage, aggression, self-injuring behaviour, completely irrational feelings of guilt and shame, lack of desire to move or hyperactivity, forced remembering (flashbacks) or amnesia, depression, avoidant behaviour etc. These are all normal reactions to totally abnormal experiences. Over time these symptoms usually go away by themselves bit by bit. The affected person processes his experiences.

Only when this does not happen, do the symptoms become a mental illness requiring therapy. This is then called “post-traumatic stress disorder”. Statistically about 50% of war victims develop this disorder. “Post-traumatic stress disorder” can persist for many years and cause “lasting changes in personality”. Then there is the danger of a break in the biography of the affected person. Anti-social behaviour, constant mistrust, dependent and criminal behaviour can develop. Victims become offenders.

Emergency pedagogy is started in the “post traumatic stress reaction” phase, during which the outcome of the traumatic experience is determined: either the traumatic experience can be processed with own strength or “post traumatic stress disorder” will develop. Paramount is the not trauma-therapeutical methods, but rather pedagogical-therapeutical methods based on

anthroposophical understanding of human beings. The self-healing power of the victim should be activated, traumatic experiences processed and integrated into one's biography. Through caring for rhythms and rituals, the rhythms of the organism which were destroyed by trauma should be harmonised again. Methods from movement therapy and massages help to loosen cramping. Art therapy approaches can create opportunities for creative, non-verbal expression of the unspeakable.

Through the planning and execution of projects, experiences of powerlessness can be overcome and one can find their way back to their own action competences. Experiential pedagogy should contribute to the rebuilding of trust in oneself and others. Simply by making plans can possibilities be opened-up, to escape the prison of forced remembering and to flee from the loss of future which trauma brings. Almesa and Zenad are two 13 year old girls who belong to the victims of the Samouni-Clan. According to her own account, Almesa clung to her dead parents for four days under rubble. She told us, how she frantically and with the last of her strength tried to scare away the bugs who began to eat their corpses. When asked, what she will do in the future, she answered choked with tears: "When I am older, I will join the armed forces and kill all those, who murdered my family!". If traumatic experiences are not successfully processed, far-reaching and long-lasting changes in personality are the ultimately consequences.

Changes in personality. Victims can then become offenders themselves. The unresolved war experiences of the children in Gaza offer fertile ground for a new generation of terrorists and suicide bombers.

### **The suffering of the children—"The emotional destruction is even greater than the material"**

Considering their experiences with the situation of children in war regions or after natural catastrophes—most recently in 2006/07 four missions in Lebanon as well as in 2008 in the earthquake region of Sichuan/China—the Friends of Waldorf Education sent a 15 person emergency team consisting of anthroposophical doctors, therapists, Waldorf pedagogues, and interpreters to Gaza, in order to assist traumatised children and their families in a pedagogical acute aid mission.

The cooperation partner of the "Friends" in Gaza was the "Gaza Community Mental Health Centre" in Gaza-City, a non-governmental umbrella organisation for mental health, which works together with the World Health Organisation (WHO). The centre was itself heavily damaged on January 27<sup>th</sup> by a rocket attack. The centre's highly competent trauma experts work under the direction of psychiatrist Dr. Ahmad Abu Tawhina in kindergartens, schools, and hospitals throughout the Gaza Strip. But they have reached their limit after weeks of trauma work. "The emotional destruction is even greater than the material", reported the Palestinian trauma experts to us.

The pedagogical emergency team of the "Friends" worked at the Omar Bin Khattab-School, an UN-run school in the totally destroyed northern district of Gaza-City. The school was heavily damaged by an Israeli rock attack and subsequent military action by special forces. Apparently the school was also misused as a military stronghold of Hamas. Two children were killed in the attack and over 20 injured. Hamsam, a ten year old girl, told us about how her sister was shot dead before her eyes by soldiers. Two children showed us their gunshot wounds. In a UNICEF tent children make form drawings and listen attentively to the stories we tell. They crave pictures. On the schoolyard we play circle games. Although the children do not want to touch us at first, the hands of aid workers are then quickly fought over. The hand offers security. The seven year old Aissa suddenly cries: "Many foreigners come to us to photograph us. Then they move on. But you came to play!".

In the city of Khan Younis in the south of Gaza, the emergency team worked in the school Eid Al Agha. The façade of the building is marked with machine gun salvos. Missile attacks on the city continue during our stay. Many children are at first inaccessible and absent. They react fearfully to flying objects, with which the Israeli military monitors Gaza. A striking number of children ask for food from the aid workers. The children's drawings, hanging on the walls of the school, are also shocking. They provide a vivid report of their traumatic experiences and the merciless extent of their internal destruction.

A particular challenge was the work with traumatised, deaf children at the Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children. It is an institution which cooperates with the Christoffel-Mission for the Blind. Eurhythmics and experiential pedagogical exercises were led with multiple children's groups. There were also opportunities to draw and sculpt with clay. The kindergarten group performed circle and round games. The school's art teacher lives in the camp of Jaballia. Two neighbouring houses were destroyed during the attack—since then he has not painted. When he saw the children drawing, he broke down. He grabbed a brush and painted his experiences. His traumatic cramping had resolved.

Multiple missions have been carried out in the Al Qattan Centre in Gaza City. The institution is run by the Al Qattan Foundation in London. Many parents brought their traumatised children to the centre for artistic therapy. The director Reem Abu Jaber requested that we organise training for her employees. Here we encountered for the first time Almesa, Zenab, and other children of the Samouni-Clan.

The rest of the Samouni-Clan now lives in the rubble of their homes in provisional sheds. A 12 year old boy showed us the still bleeding wounds on his back. A one-and-a-half year old girl has burns on her legs, which clearly indicate the use of white phosphorus. Her brother has similar burns on his back. White phosphorus causes terrible burns when it comes in contact with skin. Besides this, poisonings cause lasting damage to internal organs. Even the smallest amounts of this horrendous substance can cause suffering in the bones and blood. The use of this substance is not banned in the form of smoke clouds for protection of soldiers according to international law, but its use as chemical weapon against civilians is. The 15 year old Helmi pointed to his navel, which is encircled by shrapnel. Many children have purulent, incrustated eyes and purulent infections around the mouth. The ten year old Abdella Heja Samule was in the house in which 36 family members died. He reported about how his four year old brother shook on the knees of his dead father: "Then the soldiers came into the room and shot him dead, my mother, and my other 16 siblings. I am the only one in my family who survived!"

### **The suffering of the parents—"Not only the children need you!"**

The emergency pedagogy work in Gaza found great international media interest. Press and radio journalists requested interviews. The emergency team of the "Friends" was also accompanied by a few TV-teams—including Al Jazeera, Arte, and ARD. The Palestinian director of the ARD-team asked us, whether emergency pedagogy could really help too. But before we could answer, he broke out in tears and showed us his bullet wound on his abdomen: "And who will help me to process my trauma?". Not only the suffering of children is immeasurable.

A married couple showed us photos of their three dead children and reported about their ordeal: "The five-year old died from a shot to the head. The nine month old was also shot to death. In the photo her eyes were still open. Our eleven year son had two shots through the lungs. He continued

to breathe for two days. Because soldiers refused to allow access to rescue workers, he couldn't be rescued." The parents call it the execution of their children. The step mother of the ten-year old Abdella sits depressed in front of her destroyed house. We give her sculpting wax. She forms it into a ball, which she tears up again and again sobbing. After some time, she can tell us. She reports, that soldiers killed her one-year old daughter. Then she takes us to the place where it happened, in a room in the destroyed house. On the wall, under which the mother tells us her dead child lay, stands written in English: "1 is gone 999 999 will follow". Vandalism of this kind can be found in Gaza at every turn. The apartment complexes were deliberately demolished by soldiers, even the floors were ripped out. The degrading, inhuman inscriptions on the walls are in Russian, English, Hebrew, and French. Olive and strawberry plantations were flattened, irrigation systems systematically destroyed, cisterns buried. A mother, who observed us while we worked with children, told us suddenly, how she had tried to suture the slit-open belly of her child with needle and thread. After two days, the child died. According to her account, rescue workers were not allowed in for days. Suddenly she cried to us: "Not only the children need you! We women can't go on anymore!".

### **"What could you achieve?"**

After four days of successful work, our crisis intervention team had to leave Gaza at the telephone request of the German Embassy in Cairo. We were about to begin emergency pedagogy work with orphans at the "Al Amal Institution for Orphanage". With assistance from the embassy, we were able to pass through the border at the last minute.

The escape like departure was captured by German television. The reported asked the deciding question during the return of the team: "What could you achieve?"

The emergency pedagogy crisis intervention was an acute aid, comparable to first aid at an accident. Although immediate healing cannot be achieved with first aid measures, these can still be an essential contribution to the continued healing of injuries. This is also true for emotional wounds, likewise for psycho-traumata.

We gave the affected persons the assurance that their pain has been noticed by others. We showed the children, that not every stranger has to be a murderer. We guided them for a moment to the experience, that life can also be beautiful. And we know that hope and joy are healing factors!

For this work benefitting psycho-traumatized children in Gaza, the UN-Goodwill ambassador for children in armed conflicts, Mrs. Radhika Comaraswamy, gave her recognition and thanks at the Omar Bin Khattab-School.

As soon as access to Gaza for aid organisations is again possible, the "Friends" want to continue their work uninterrupted there. They can do this though, only when they have enough donated funds available.

During the rushed return to the border, the emergency team once again passes by the sign with the inscription: "Welcome to Gaza". In radio the song "Calling Gaza" by the Palestinian singer Bilal is playing. The text is about the desperate attempt by a Palestinian to reach the UN by telephone, to report human rights abuses and war crimes—but he only gets the answering machine every time. And then we remember the 21-year old law student Barakat, who always laughed so superficially while at the same time talking about suicide. He showed us the wall of his deliberately demolished

apartment, where in Hebrew is written: “You don’t need to rebuild your houses anymore. We are coming again!”. And we swore: us too!

Bernd Ruf

Annotations [1] Quoted from Spiegel-online from 20.01.2009. [2] Quoted from Press-TV from 13.02.2009 (>> engl. Original). [3] ibid. [4] ibid. [5] The emergency pedagogy crisis intervention team consisted of: Fiona Bay (nurse in training), Mirja Cordes (interpreter), Diana Jessen (pedagogue), Alexa Kuenburg (medical professional), Georg Kreuer (interpreter), Lukas Mall (experiential pedagogue), Dr. Claudia McKeen (doctor), Dr. Elke Mascher (doctor), Marie Pfister (interpreter), Jenny Rueter (curative eurhythmist), Bernd Ruf (special education teacher), Dr. Bruno Sandkühler (pedagogue), Anni Sauerland (experiential pedagogue), Kristian Stähle-Ario (art therapist), Andrea Wiebelitz (pre-school teacher).