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MIDDLE EAST

# One Year After War, People of Gaza Still Sit Among the Ruins

By **JODI RUDOREN** and **MAJD AL WAHEIDI** AUG. 22, 2015

GAZA CITY — The men of Shejaiya still come daily to sit vigil in the desolate ruins of their neighborhood, drinking tea and playing chess. But these days, there are also clusters of construction workers on Shejaiya’s dirt paths, finally pouring a few cement foundations and hammering together wood planks.

Fouad Harara, 56, arrives at his house on Montar Street before 6 a.m. to check the previous day’s work against his thick wad of engineering blueprints. He returns at midday with chicken and rice for the 10 men who have, over the past four weeks, completed the cinder-block ground floor where Mr. Harara plans to revive his electrical-services business and erected pylons for the second of seven sketched stories.

“Exactly the way it was,” Mr. Harara said of what would replace the home he built in 1993, one of hundreds flattened by Israeli attacks on Shejaiya, the Gaza City neighborhood that abuts the border fence, during the war last summer. “I was comfortable in this place,” he added. “We lost everything, but it’s still in my memory.”

A year after the halt to hostilities between Israel and Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip on Aug. 26, 2014, not a single one of the nearly 18,000 homes destroyed or severely damaged in Gaza is habitable. About 12 percent of their owners have been approved to rebuild through the complex Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism created by the United Nations, Israel and the Palestinian Authority, but just under 4

percent — 719 families as of Saturday — have actually purchased cement or other materials.

Those involved in the process, and advocacy groups, attribute the slow pace to Palestinian political infighting, Israel's involvement in approving projects and participants, and a lack of funds. International donors have sent about \$340 million of the \$2.5 billion they pledged for Gaza's reconstruction last fall, and much of that was spent on removing rubble, on temporary housing for 100,000 displaced residents or on minor repairs.

Israeli, Palestinian and United Nations officials acknowledge that cement has flooded Gaza's black market, with some undoubtedly ending up in the militants' underground tunnel network — the very thing the monitoring system was set up to prevent.

“We know and believe that some of it goes to the wrong places,” said Maj. Adam Avidan, Israel's point person on the mechanism. At one point, 18 of 30 beneficiaries bought their full allotment of cement and “went the same day and sold it on the black market,” he said. “They didn't build their houses.”

About 37,000 tons of cement sits unused in Gaza warehouses, nearing or past its expiration date for load-bearing projects.

Mofeed M. Al Hassaina, the Gaza-based minister of housing and public works, was in Shejaiya on July 23, when Mr. Harara was among the first four owners to start rebuilding, surrounded by clicking cameras. But Mr. Hassaina said he was afraid to return to the neighborhood, and had turned down an invitation to a school opening there after three days of demonstrations by residents outside his office.

“I cannot go there, because they are angry,” he said. “Maybe they're cursing us and they're shouting at me because they're frustrated about their life.”

Palestinian civil-society groups pushed forward a petition this month calling for an end to the reconstruction mechanism, saying that Israel's access to a database of destroyed homes and its role in reviewing applications only entrenched its control over Gaza, a position echoed in a report published this week by Gisha, an Israeli

group that promotes freedom of movement for Palestinians.

But Mr. Hassaina, other Palestinian leaders and United Nations representatives all said that Israel had done its part in reasonable time and had allowed cement into Gaza. Empty coffers, they said, are the primary problem.

“Now we have 2,000 names that have been approved by Israel, Israel sends the material, but where is the money?” Mr. Hassaina asked. Qatar has provided \$6 million of a pledged \$50 million to rebuild 1,000 homes, he said, and “Kuwait promised \$75 million, but we don’t have anything yet.”

The International Crisis Group, in a report scheduled to be released this week, says international donors have not paid up because of the worsening rift between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, the Islamist movement that controls Gaza, and the lack of a long-term truce between Hamas and Israel, which it says makes another round of violence likely.

Others complain that reconstruction is being pursued piecemeal, without an overall development plan including infrastructure for neighborhoods like Shejaiya or any structural economic change to address unemployment in Gaza, which is over 40 percent. The reconstruction mechanism imagines going beyond rebuilding the homes destroyed last year to address Gaza’s prewar shortage of 85,000 housing units.

“Restoring the situation to June 2014 isn’t O.K. — far from it, that would be condemning Gaza to more misery,” said Robert Piper, the United Nations’ deputy special coordinator for the peace process. “The potential disaster is that we not move fast enough on the software — planning and coordination, for example — rather than the hardware.”

Mr. Piper and Bashir Rayyes, the Palestinian Authority’s coordinator for Gaza reconstruction, said the focus on destroyed homes was too narrow. About 78,000 Gaza families received money to repair homes with minor or moderate damage (though many of them resold some cement for up to triple the mechanism’s prescribed 520 shekels, about \$135, per ton).

Mr. Hassaina, the public works minister, said 455,000 tons of rubble had been cleared; 1.5 million tons remain. According to the mechanism's website, 115 larger projects, like schools, hospitals and roads, are in progress, 15 have been completed, and 237 are in the approval pipeline. Mr. Rayyes said 95 percent of Gaza's electric grid and water supply had been restored.

"Things are not great, but things are moving, and guys, guess what, we need more money," Mr. Rayyes said. "Everybody is looking at the empty half of the cup, and honestly, that is not helping."

The people of Shejaiya cannot live on a repaved road or in a restored power plant. They await a text message like the one Hussein Sukkar, owner of building No. G-10-80-1040, received last week ordering him to bring "original copies of land ownership" to the ministry of public works. He had been approved to rebuild.

A typical new home is allocated \$50,000. Owners can withdraw money in installments from the Bank of Palestine, then buy materials from the mechanism's 100 approved vendors, whose facilities are under 24-hour surveillance, and hire one of its 260 contractors (10 vendors and 55 contractors have been suspended for unspecified violations). Inspectors from the United Nations or the housing ministry are supposed to visit each site to ensure that the work is complete before releasing the next batch of money and material.

Mr. Sukkar's is one of two homes on Karama Street where work is underway; at least 15 more were destroyed. On Nazaz Street, where almost all of the homes remain in ruins, six men sat on plastic chairs under a tree one recent afternoon.

"The real war is now," Kayed al Zaza, 45, said, complaining that the rebuilding process was unfair and based on money and personal connections. "It's worse than Zionists' wars, as it is launched against us by our own divided politicians."

Abdel Hadi al Ejla, 56, lamented, "Tell me what kind of homeland this is, which lacks homes for its inhabitants."

A relative, Nemer al Ejla, has been working from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. on the home of another family member — a bittersweet task because his own application is still

pending. “I reconstruct this place, but I have no home, and I live in a small tent with my 13 children,” he said bitterly. “I want to explode.”

The Harara family, too, is split: Four of their 19 buildings, which housed 250 people and surrounded a patch used for picnics before the war, are under construction.

Mr. Harara has a photograph of his former and future home affixed to the tent he put up after the fighting stopped last August, where he has spent virtually every day since. It shows a flourishing nut tree, which he said was felled by Israeli bombs.

A few yards away, green branches sprout from the ground, some part of the tree apparently having revived itself.

“We are the same — our homes and ourselves,” said Mr. Harara’s brother Abed, 53. “We will not die. Our roots are like this tree.”

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