

GAZA STRIP 2003

On January 31st I received a very welcome message from Dr. Bernard Sabella, “Come to Gaza”!!

During the midst of a Palestinian reprisal (Second Intifada) Dr. Bernard Sabella was able to arrange a visit for me to the Gaza Strip. Approval to visit Gaza requires authorization in advance by Israeli authorities, consequentially it's not possible to establish a date in advance as approval by Israeli authorities is unpredictable, and usually is granted to male visitors the day before the effective date. On the evening of January 31st I received a welcome message from Dr. Sabella advising me I was cleared up visiting the Gaza Strip, the next day, Saturday, February 1, 2003. The message stated, *“Friends will meet you on the Palestinian side of the Israeli checkpoint in a Volkswagen van with Red Cross and Red Crescent ambulance markings. Arrangements have been made for a driver to meet you at 9:00 A.M. and take you into Gaza City.”* My initial appointment was with Mr. Elias Manneh, Chairman of the Near East Council of Churches, Gaza Strip. Great Day, I cannot wait, Thank you, Dr. Sabella!

The story of the “Gaza Strip” is best understood when accompanied by a brief description of how this small, narrow strip of land on the Mediterranean Sea could become a continual battlefield between Israel and Palestine. As described by the U.N. at that time. “living conditions have become more wretched over the past ten years and deteriorating further and faster than earlier predictions and likely to be unlivable by 2020”. The U.N. Report was dated 2002! How can this happen?

In 1947-1948 the United Nations made a decision to partition Palestine into two territories; the State of Israel and the Territory of Palestine which includes the Gaza Strip. At that time the Gaza Strip was a community of about 80,000 Arab/Palestinians located on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea in an area blessed with a climate favorable to agriculture resulting in an abundance of fruit-bearing trees, highlighted by the well-known “Jaffa” oranges. It was a thriving, economic and prosperous community.



Immediately upon partitioning of Palestine by the United Nations warfare broke out between Palestinian forces and Israeli military armies. Israeli military forces overpowered the Palestinians and methodically began to take over Arab (Palestinian) villages, especially in the Galilee area (Northern Palestine). This action unleashed a torrent of Palestinian refugees from that region; some migrated to Jordan (Palestinian refugee camps continue to exist in Jordan), and many other regions in Palestine and other parts of the world. In a matter of just a few years 700,000-800,000 Palestinian refugees while fleeing from Israeli military forces and relocating in the Gaza Strip. The magnitude of refugees overwhelmed the small area and currently is regarded as one of the most heavily populated areas in the world. The Gaza Strip is a small piece of land; 25 miles long and 7 miles wide and is physically reduced in size due to Israeli imposed “buffer zones” built on Palestinian land.

During the nineteen-year period (1948-1967) the Gaza Strip was sequentially controlled by Trans-Jordan, Palestine, Israel, and Egypt. Since the Six-Day War in 1967 Gaza has been under military occupation by Israel, and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are represented by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) a Palestinian political party

As the result of a Palestinian election held in 2006 Hamas, a new political group, took over administrative responsibilities in the Gaza Strip. For a number of years, Israeli military forces have enforced travel bans on Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip, and sharply restricted entry and exit of goods and products from Gaza devastating the local economy. The two million Palestinians living there have lost their freedom of movement and are saddled with defective community services resulting in limited supply of electricity and other community services coupled with costly fees for electricity and the lack of proper sanitation and clean water resulting in an economy laid

to waste leading to a complete deficit of the necessities of life for these people being held as captive in their native land.

February 1, 2003, GAZA DAY! Experiences during the visit to the Gaza Strip

I woke up early, gathered my passport, visa documents, and “throwaway cameras”, (a throw away in case they were confiscated by the Israeli military), and I hustled to Notre Dame Center, and hired a driver to take me to the Gaza checkpoint. The message from Dr. Sabella read, “Friends will meet you at the Palestinian side of the Israeli checkpoint in a Volkswagen with Red Cross and Red Crescent ambulance markings”. I really had no idea what to expect, I was traveling alone into a very strange and militarily contested area, the Gaza Strip. Gaza was in the daily news as the biggest battles of the Intifada were raging! The driver left me off at the Israeli entrance into Gaza. There are two checkpoints between Israel and Palestinian Gaza, the Israeli checkpoint is the first checkpoint. Between the two checkpoints is a “no man's land” (a buffer zone between Israel and Palestine, Gaza Strip) about a half-mile long surrounded by barbed wire and surrounded by bombed out buildings and then the second checkpoint, the Palestinian checkpoint. It was scary!

The Israeli checkpoint was highly automated with Israeli soldiers positioned on an upper level and numerous cameras scanning the entry level. There were several sequential individual checkpoints, small phone booth size rooms with automatic doors that closed after you entered the cubicle. You waited until the soldiers examined your documents, and after your passage was approved an exit door opened and you progressed to the next cubicle and waited while a duplicate procedure was repeated; wait, and wait until the exit door opened. After the 3rd cubicle door opened I was clear of the checkpoint and free to progress to the Palestinian checkpoint. (Several years ago we visited Berlin while it was under communist control and were being examined while progressing through “CheckPoint Charlie in East Berlin”. As I was passing through the Israeli checkpoint I could feel hostility in the air, very reminiscent of my recollections of the East Berlin experience). I began my way through “No Mans Land” to the Palestinian checkpoint about a half a mile away, I was all eyes and ears. There were bombed out buildings on either side, mostly tin sheds demolished by repeated bombing and tank fire. As I approached the Palestinian checkpoint all of a sudden I hear a loud noise, **BANG - BANG - BANG** AND NO PLACE TO HIDE!! I thought it must be a machine gun, false alarm!! To my relief as I looked around I found the loud noise was a worker on the Palestinian side with a rivet gun assembling a roof panel on a metal building. What a relief, this is ALL NEW TERRITORY FOR ME!! Passing through the Palestinian checkpoint guards involved answering several questions, why was I here, what were my plans, etc.? I was traveling light, no backpack, suitcases, etc. and they let me through, and lo and behold the Volkswagen with Red Cross and Red Crescent marking was waiting, Happy Day!

The driver drove me to the office of Mr. Elias Manneh, Chairman, Near East Council of Churches (Gaza). Mr. Manneh greeted me with a cup of hot Arabic coffee. He described the role he and his organization play in providing humanitarian service to refugees living in the Gaza Strip. He had arranged for an escort to conduct a tour for me and told me to feel free to visit any location, or ask any questions I may have

Mr. Manneh is a fine gentleman and was extending classic Palestinian hospitality during my visit by offering the services of his organization to assist me and told me to feel free to view anything I wanted while I was in Gaza. However, it was noticeable he was under personal stress and he described the cause of his uneasiness. The day before my visit there was a major Israeli air strike and his home had been a target; his home was leveled from direct hits of aerial bombs, no wonder he was a basket case; fortunately, he and his family and grandchildren had evacuated their home in time, nobody was injured...but he was visibly shaken. Regardless of his stress he was a wonderful, gracious and congenial host and I will always be grateful for him.



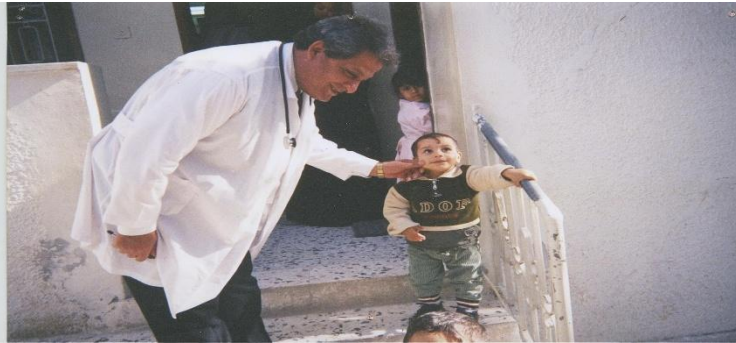
The driver drove me to the center of Gaza City and it was a true war zone, buildings demolished, three large buses were positioned into a triangle, they were burned out messes, just tangled hunks of steel. I left the van and wandered along the crumbled, shattered remains of a sidewalk; some items were still smoldering from the bombing the night before. I just stood there and stared at the sight and tried to comprehend in my mind the terror that it must be to live under this condition, it is in-human! Still smoldering in the street market were wet pieces of clothing, "T" shirts, sweat suits smoldering from the fire brigades attempting to quell the flames, I will never be able to erase from my mind memories of walking through the remains of this simple street market, victims of an insane war, where only people suffer; not pilots, not terrorists, soldiers or tanks; no, it's people, plain everyday people with families and children, innocent children who bear the brunt of the damage, an insult to humanity, when will it ever stop?



Local people told me after the Israeli missile attack Apache helicopters had not only fired the missiles, they returned to film the results of the attack which were highlighted on early morning Israeli TV programs and proclaiming the reason for the attack was to destroy a Gaza machine shop making munitions. I spent a long time walking the streets of the bombed-out area, trying my

best to absorb it all---the area was totally a neighborhood shopping center selling new and used clothing and a fruit market, not a machine shop making munitions!

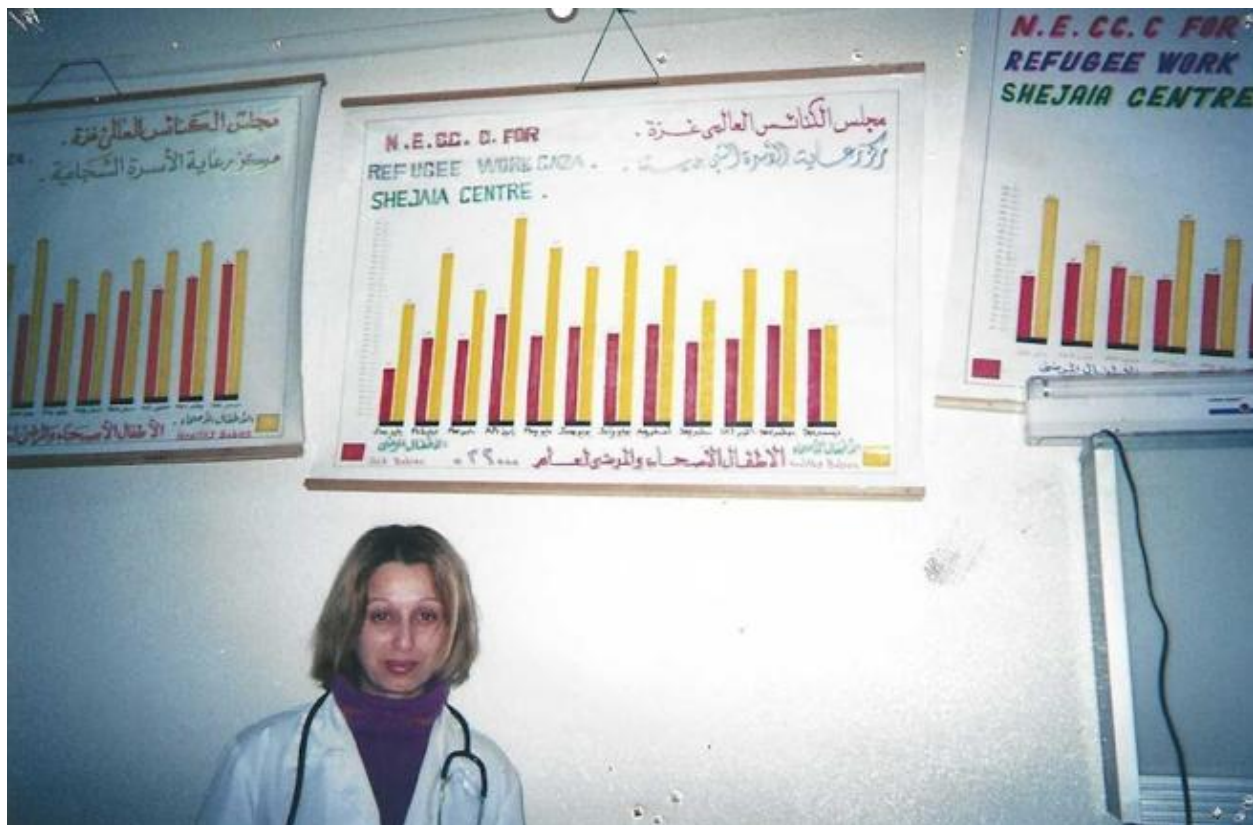
Next, we visited the Shejala Medical Clinic, it was a small building with just a few beds. The doctor was treating a small boy, probably 3-4 years old suffering from a stomach ailment. I was impressed with the tender service the doctor was rendering to this small patient in this cramped medical center. Everything was neat and orderly and the doctor was devoting full attention to the sick little child.



A Good Doctor, a Happy Patient

Later the doctor informed me the boy was suffering from severe stomach cramps...he was starving and hungry...he needed food and nourishment!

In front of the clinic was a van serving as a mobile dentist's office. There was a patient, and an elderly man having dental repair. The concept is to have mobile dentist facilities in order to treat people needing dental work at their homes as most people have no means of transportation; the dentist goes to the patient. A section of the clinic was dedicated to nutrition. A young lady was in charge and pointed out the immense problem due to the lack of nutrition, the number of persons and children experiencing malnutrition was startling; the walls of the clinic were papered with an array of charts illustrating the severe malnutrition by age groups and those suffering from undernourishment that will be affected for the rest of their lives.



Nutrition Charts (red bar is actual, yellow is recommended) all charts are far below recommended levels

Frequently the eyesight of young boys is seriously affected and requires surgery at a young age, the problem is receiving medical services that are only available in Israel and at a significant cost, and so many young boys will be unable to have their eyes affliction remedied.

The Prenatal-Postnatal Center was our next stop on our visit; it was filled to capacity, women of all ages; young, middle-aged, and some up in age. The clinic found that 60% of expectant mothers

were anemic. With a birth rate of 30.5 per 1000 population (USA 12 per1000) prenatal and postnatal services are vital...the tragedy is only about 30% of expectant mothers take advantage of the service. It appeared to me the clinic was lacking equipment, however, they showed me their ultrasound equipment to monitor pregnancies. Next, we visited the vocational education facility, and I was impressed with the diligent training being afforded to those seeking to better themselves with skill training. Sewing classes were available for women, and fully occupied an array of sewing machines to permit ladies to fine-tune their sewing skills and make clothing for sale.

Sewing Classes at Natal Center---Gaza

Jobs are virtually non-existent in Gaza due to Israel closing the border coupled with the inability of people to relocate to the West Bank, or emigrate to seek employment elsewhere. The local economy is dead in the water due to the inability to import and export goods and services, coupled with the escalating prices creating a crisis in Gaza; electric service, for example, is available only for limited periods of time and the cost is outrageous.



The next visit was to the Secretarial/Business/Computer School. The school was well equipped with computers, good lighting, and clean and presentable. It has a three-year curriculum.



I was introduced to the English class, and girls were fully alert with their textbooks neatly lined up on their desks. I was invited to introduce myself to the class, which I did, and explained I was in the Holy Land on a volunteer assignment. The instructor advised the girls this was an opportunity to ask questions and use their English skills. All was quiet and still. Then one lovely bright girl raised her hand and asked, "Why? Why is America helping the Israeli government against us, Why?"

A few moments of a long silence!

I searched my mind for a truthful response; however, before I could reply she asked a follow-up question. "If many Americans do not agree with President Bush, why don't you tell him"? Then other students chimed in and the "WHY" question kept being repeated and repeated, all in friendly tones. I did my best, but I did not have a good, reasonable and truthful reply. I responded by providing a litany of humanitarian organizations providing assistance; the U.N Relief Services, Catholic Charities, etc., but never did I provide an adequate response to the WHY question., The

topic changed, a bright young student asked me, “will America attack Iraq”? I replied I did not know; it was a 50-50 situation. Her response was, “if America attacks Iraq what would happen to us”?

(Note: Three months later, on March 19, 2003, the USA launched a preemptive attack on Iraq.)