

The ghost town

AP, Gaza City

It's the holy month of Ramadan when people throughout the Muslim world meet with friends and family, buy presents for loved ones and break a day-long fast each evening amid colourful street scenes.

But not in Gaza City, one of the world's most densely populated cities. A ceaseless Israeli bombing campaign, with airstrikes every five minutes, has turned the frenetic hub of the Gaza Strip into a virtual ghost town, emptying streets, closing shops and keeping hundreds of thousands of people close to home where they feel safest from the bombs.

In Israel, hundreds of rockets fired by Gaza militants also send civilians running into bomb shelters and staying close to home. However, there have been no fatalities there, while the death toll in Gaza topped 127 yesterday from the five-day offensive.

Residents in Gaza remain torn between fear for their safety and sadness over the loss of a normal Ramadan, usually a time of deep spirituality leavened by great joy and celebration.

In nearby Jabalya, 77-year-old Ibrahim Mahmoud Daoud looked on grimly as several young men from the neighbourhood helped him sift through the rubble of his two-story home, levelled early Friday by a bomb dropped from an Israeli warplane. A father to eight -- seven married daughters and an unmarried son -- Daoud sounded defiant as he considered the latest violent round in the long-running struggle between Israel and Hamas.

It was not clear why the home was targeted. Israel says it targets buildings used by Hamas for military purposes.

Some quietly criticise Hamas. Abu Ali, a driver for his family business who identified himself only by his first names to avoid Hamas retribution, insisted that at least in his immediate neighbourhood, the movement was widely reviled.

"Everybody here hates Hamas," he said. "But they're too afraid to say so publicly. Our food comes from Israel but what we give them in return is rockets -- rockets that don't even make little holes in the ground."



The mother and sister of Palestinian Mahmud al-Sewati mourn over his body during his funeral in Gaza City, yesterday. *From top right, A Palestinian man inspects the rubble of a destroyed mosque following an Israeli military strike in the Nusseirat refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip; People collects belongings from a destroyed house after an air raid; Demonstrators hold a banner reading "Free Palestine" during a rally against the Israeli military offensive in the Gaza strip in downtown Rome, Italy; activists gather to protest the Israeli bombing of Gaza during a rally in front of the Israeli Embassy in Washington, DC; and a girl holds a placard depicting the humanitarian toll of the conflict in Durban, South Africa. The death toll from the Israeli air strikes killed 135 Palestinians so far.*



PHOTO: AFP

Sisi warns against Gaza 'escalation'

Blair arrives in Cairo

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi warned yesterday that escalating the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza would cost more "innocent lives," as the death toll climbed to 127 Palestinians.

Sisi's spokesman said the government was in touch with both sides after the president met Mideast Quartet envoy Tony Blair in Cairo.

"The president warned of the dangers of military escalation, and the casualties would cause among innocent civilians," the spokesman said in a statement.

Israeli air strikes on the Gaza Strip killed 22 people Saturday, bringing to 127 the toll on the fifth day of violence, medics said.

The air strikes are in response to Hamas rocket fire into Israel, which have not caused any deaths.

Meanwhile, Mideast Quartet envoy Tony Blair arrived in Cairo yesterday for talks on ending the violence in Gaza.

Blair, who represents the European Union, Russia, United Nations and United States, will hold talks with Egyptian officials to press for an end to the conflict.

Despite international concern, truce efforts have been unsuccessful, according to Egypt, which had been key in mediating previous ceasefires between Hamas and Israel.

West moves for Gaza ceasefire

Iran condemns US, UN inaction; Arabs to meet tomorrow

AGENCIES

British Foreign Secretary William Hague said he will discuss an international push for a ceasefire in Gaza with US Secretary of State John Kerry and his German and French counterparts during talks in Vienna today.

Meanwhile, Arab foreign ministers are to meet in Cairo tomorrow to discuss the escalating conflict between Hamas militants in Gaza and Israel which has already killed more than 135 Palestinians, a diplomat said.

Hague said in a statement yesterday that the discussions on ending the hostilities between Israel and Gaza would take place on the sidelines of talks on Iran's nuclear programme in the Austrian capital.

"It is clear that we need urgent, concerted international action to secure a ceasefire, as was the case in 2012" during the last round of conflict between Israel and militants in the Palestinian coastal enclave, Hague said.

He said he had also spoken by telephone

yesterday with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman.

"I stressed the need for an immediate de-escalation and restoration of the November 2012 ceasefire, our deep concern about the number of civilian casualties and the need for all sides to avoid further civilian injuries and the loss of innocent life," Hague said.

Meanwhile Iran's foreign minister has called for an "immediate end" to Israel's bombing of Gaza and criticised the United States for not restraining its most important Middle Eastern ally.

Mohammad Javad Zarif, in a taped interview with US broadcaster NBC to air today, urged Washington to use the United Nations to stop the Israeli strikes.

"We know that all the weapons that are used by Israel in order to attack civilians in Gaza have been provided by the United States and we don't see any move by the United States to condemn that, to use the Security Council in order to put an

end to it," he added.

As the conflict between Hamas and Israel taking more civilian toll, The Arab states said they will convene a meeting tomorrow to take a united front to face the situation.

Kuwait, which holds the rotating leadership of the Arab League headquartered in the Egyptian capital, had demanded the "urgent" meeting, the diplomat told AFP yesterday.

There has been no coordinated Arab response to the conflict which erupted on Tuesday when Israel launched waves of air strikes against Gaza aimed at halting rocket fire across the border.

Egypt, the traditional broker in Israeli-Hamas conflicts, said Friday its efforts to halt violence in the Gaza Strip had met with "stubbornness".

But it is seen as having taken a step back from the latest round of fighting.

Its new government has been opposed to Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood which the military ousted from power last year.

Landgrab: Israel's motive in Gaza

ROBERT FISK

OK, so by this afternoon (Wednesday), the exchange rate of death in two days was 40-0 in favour of Israel. But now for the Gaza story you won't be hearing from anyone else in the next few hours.

It's about land. The Israelis of Sederot are coming under rocket fire from the Palestinians of Gaza and now the Palestinians are getting their comeuppance. Sure. But wait, how come all those Palestinians -- all 1.5 million -- are crammed into Gaza in the first place? Well, their families once lived, didn't they, in what is now called Israel? And got chucked out -- or fled for their lives -- when the Israeli state was created.

And -- a drawing in of breath is now perhaps required -- the people who lived in Sederot in early 1948 were not Israelis, but Palestinian Arabs. Their village was called Huj. Nor were they enemies of Israel. Two years earlier, these same Arabs had actually hidden Jewish Haganah fighters from the British Army. But when the Israeli army turned up at Huj on 31 May 1948, they expelled all the Arab villagers -- to the Gaza Strip! Refugees, they became. David Ben Gurion (Israel's first Prime Minister) called it an "unjust and unjustified action". Too bad. The Palestinians of Huj were never allowed back.

And today, well over 6,000 descendants of the Palestinians from Huj -- now Sederot -- live in the squalor of Gaza, among

Death toll rises in Gaza as truce efforts waver



Horror as handicapped care bombed in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Twenty-year-old Palestinian Sally Sagr lies in a hospital bed in Gaza's Shifa hospital with burns that have turned her cheeks an angry pink beneath her ventilation tube.

She survived an Israeli strike in the early hours of Saturday morning that hit a care home for Palestinians with special needs.

Two of her fellow residents were not so lucky. Thirty-year-old Ola Washahi and 47-year-old Suha Abu Saada were killed when the rocket slammed into the home, destroying it.

The two women's body parts were still being pulled from the rubble hours later, causing initial confusion over whether another person had been killed.

The facility's director, Jamila Alaywa, is unable to contain her fury as she describes the tragedy that has befallen the centre she set up in 1994.

"Both Ola and Suha had severe mental and physical handicaps, and had been living at the centre since it was founded," she told AFP.

The building in northern Gaza's Beit Lahya housed 13 residents, including some who were on weekend visits at their family homes when the strike hit.

Five residents and a helper were inside, screaming in terror as the building collapsed around them.

"They didn't understand what was happening and they were so frightened," Alaywa said.

"They fired the rocket and it hit us without any warning. There was no warning strike with an empty rocket," she said.

Israel has said it tries to minimise civilian casualties by firing a small missile at a target first, to give non-combatants a chance to leave.

The Israeli military did not immedi-

ately respond to a request for comment on the strike on the care home.

"Ola and Suha's bodies were torn into pieces," Alaywa said.

"We never imagined that something like this could happen. There is no one in the residence or anyone around us that belongs to the resistance."

The two women are among the 127 people killed since Tuesday, when Israel launched Operation Protective Edge aimed at halting rocket fire from militants in the Gaza Strip.

The aerial campaign has also



wounded more than 940 people, and Hamas and other militant groups have fired hundreds of rockets into Israel, where there have been no fatalities.

For now, the wounded residents of Alaywa's facility remain in hospital.

Sally and 28-year-old Ahmed al-Awar are in intensive care, being treated for serious burns.

Alaywa has made arrangements for the residents who were away to remain with their families for now, and is hoping to find places at another charity for her wounded charges when they recover.

But she pleaded on Saturday for help to ensure the home would be rebuilt.

"I hope that the world will help me. I want to rebuild my association and to be able once again to take care of these people -- they are my children."



the "terrorists" Israel is claiming to destroy and who are shooting at what was Huj. Interesting story.

And now let's cross to the West Bank. First of all, Benjamin Netanyahu said he couldn't talk to Palestinian "President" Mahmoud Abbas because he didn't also represent Hamas. Then when Abbas formed a unity government, Netanyahu said he couldn't talk to Abbas because he had unified himself with the "terrorist" Hamas. Now he says he can only talk to him if he breaks with Hamas -- even though he won't then represent Hamas.

Meanwhile, that great leftist Israeli philosopher Uri Avnery -- 90 years old and still, thankfully, going strong -- has picked up on his country's latest obsession: the danger that IS will storm west from its Iraqi/Syrian "caliphate" and arrive on the east bank of the Jordan river.

"And Netanyahu said," according to Avnery, "if they are not stopped by the permanent Israeli garrison there (on the Jordan river), they will appear at the gates of Tel Aviv." The truth, of course, is that the Israeli air force would have crushed IS the moment it dared to cross the Jordanian border from Iraq or Syria.

The importance of this, however, is that if Israel keeps its army on the Jordan (to protect Israel from IS), a future "Palestine" state will have no borders and will be an enclave within Israel, surrounded on all sides by Israeli-held territory.

"Much like the South African Bantustans," says Avnery. In other words, no "viable" state of Palestine will ever exist. After all, aren't IS just the same as Hamas? Of course not.

The Palestinians of Gaza -- and please forget, forever, the 6,000 Palestinians whose families come from the land of Sederot -- are allied to the tens of thousands of Islamists threatening Maliki of Baghdad, Assad of Damascus or President Goodluck Jonathan in Abuja. Even more to the point, if IS is heading towards the edge of the West Bank, why is the Israeli government still building colonies there -- illegally, and on Arab land -- for Israeli civilians?

This is not just about the foul murder of three Israelis in the occupied West Bank or the foul murder of a Palestinian in occupied East Jerusalem. Nor about the arrest of many Hamas militants and politicians in the West Bank. Nor about rockets. As usual, it's about land.

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