

**What has life really been like for those
living in Gaza in the last 15 months?
This article – from *Le Croix* – brings home
some of the real horror...
prepare yourself before reading it...**

*Marie Boeton - The nameless children
of Gaza, the story of a father's
miraculous reunion with his daughter*

*Since the start of the war in Gaza, 17,000 young children have been separated from their families.
Among them are some too young to even state their names. On the ground, doctors and
humanitarian workers are racing to reunite these “babies of the ruins” with their families.*



*Separated in different hospitals after the bombing of their building on October 13, 2023,
Mohammed searched for his daughter Jana for months. He finally found her in November.
(Photo by Saher Alghorra for La Croix L'Hebdo)*

Just a few hours to pack up a life. On October 13, 2023, Amal and Mohammed Labbad hurriedly gathered the essentials. The Israeli army had just ordered the residents of northern Gaza to evacuate. Eight months pregnant, Amal was struggling to breathe; Mohammed did everything he could to protect her. The suitcases were almost ready when a bomb hit their building in Beit Lahiya, in the city centre. Rescue teams arrived quickly, but in the ensuing chaos, they sent Mohammed, Amal, and their two-year-old daughter Jana to three different hospitals in the northern part of Gaza.

Amal, severely injured in the head, was taken to Kamal Adwan Hospital. Unconscious upon arrival, she was immediately sent to surgery for an emergency caesarean. She gave birth to a baby boy, born into hell, but alive. The doctors knew nothing about the mother, so they scribbled “unknown” on a piece of paper next to the crib while they waited for Amal to regain consciousness. But her condition worsened. Amal died on October 22, at the age of 23. Her newborn son remained “unknown,” a ghost baby.

Jana, suffering from a severe concussion, was treated at Al-Chifa Hospital. Mohammed, injured in the shoulder and burned on his left side, was directed to the Indonesian Hospital. Almost a year later, when contacted via WhatsApp, Mohammed's eyes reflected a man who had seen it all. He now lives under a tent in the Al-Mawasi refugee camp in the southern part of Gaza. He has nothing left except a mobile phone, a few clothes, and a jerrycan that he carries around in search of drinking water.

In his “former life,” as he says, Mohammed was a computer engineer. Fluent in English and hardworking, he worked for a UN branch in Gaza. He had everything: a great job, a happy marriage, and another baby on the way—until the blast on October 13, 2023, changed everything. His life took a different course that day.

Now, his days lack definition, and he spends them replaying the events: “I did everything I could to pack the bags on time. But I failed...” He could blame the entire world—Benjamin Netanyahu, who has decimated Gaza, Hamas, which uses him and others as human shields, or the Western world, which expresses outrage over the plight of Gazans but only raises an eyebrow. But no.

Mohammed blames only himself. It feels as though they’ve taken everything from him, even his anger.

He eventually found his daughter, Jana, in northern Gaza, where she remains stranded, but he still doesn't know what happened to his son. “Is he dead or alive? Is he in an orphanage? Or maybe already adopted? The worst part is not knowing.”

'Babies of the ruins'

The suffering of children in Gaza is well-documented, almost to the point of exhaustion. According to UNICEF, over 14,000 children have been killed since the war began, and 17,000 are “unaccompanied or separated” from their families. Among them are children without identities, like Amal and Mohammed’s son. How many are there? It’s impossible to say. No statistics, nothing. They are the forgotten of the forgotten.

*"If infants arrive at the hospital without an identity,
it means there were no survivors around them."
(Dr. Nasser Bolbol at Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis)*

"I've seen many babies without identities come through my department," says Dr. Nasser Bolbol, a physician at Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis. "In general, the rescuers who bring them in found them in the rubble, right after a bombing. If they arrive here without an identity, it's because there were no survivors around them."

When rescuers manage to gather a name on-site, they immediately write it on the child's abdomen. Otherwise, they simply write "unknown." Nasser calls them the "babies of the ruins." What are their chances of survival? "Basically, one in two. They arrive here very weak, and we're out of supplies."

The bombings are an additional threat. One such attack on Al-Chifa Hospital on October 25, 2023, still haunts Dr. Bolbol. At the time, he was overseeing the neonatal ward. "Around 3 a.m., the oxygen supply was hit by Israeli airstrikes.

We lost three newborns. By 6 a.m., I was ordered to evacuate the ward immediately. We had to move 45 infants to the operating room, but there were only seven of us on staff..."

"We rushed it, trying to carry five babies at a time. We managed to transfer them all in time, but the operating room was freezing. We put the babies together under heavy blankets, but it wasn't enough. The most premature ones didn't survive. Hypothermia," he recalls, visibly shaken. That night, Nasser lost several nameless babies. How many? "Honestly, I don't remember... But several, for sure."

'We assign a number to avoid confusion'

There are also survivors, like the girl—also unnamed—who was brought to Nasser last spring. The rescuers found her in a tree, thrown there by the blast of a bomb. Nasser is still stunned and exclaims, "Can you imagine? In a tree, and still alive!" Sometimes, life insists. His colleague, Ebraheem Matar, has also seen countless unknown children. "I've seen dozens and dozens of them. Not just babies—older children too. Some are so traumatized by what they've just lived through that they can't even speak. Not even their names," says Matar, a former intern at Al-Aqsa Hospital in Deir Al-Balah.

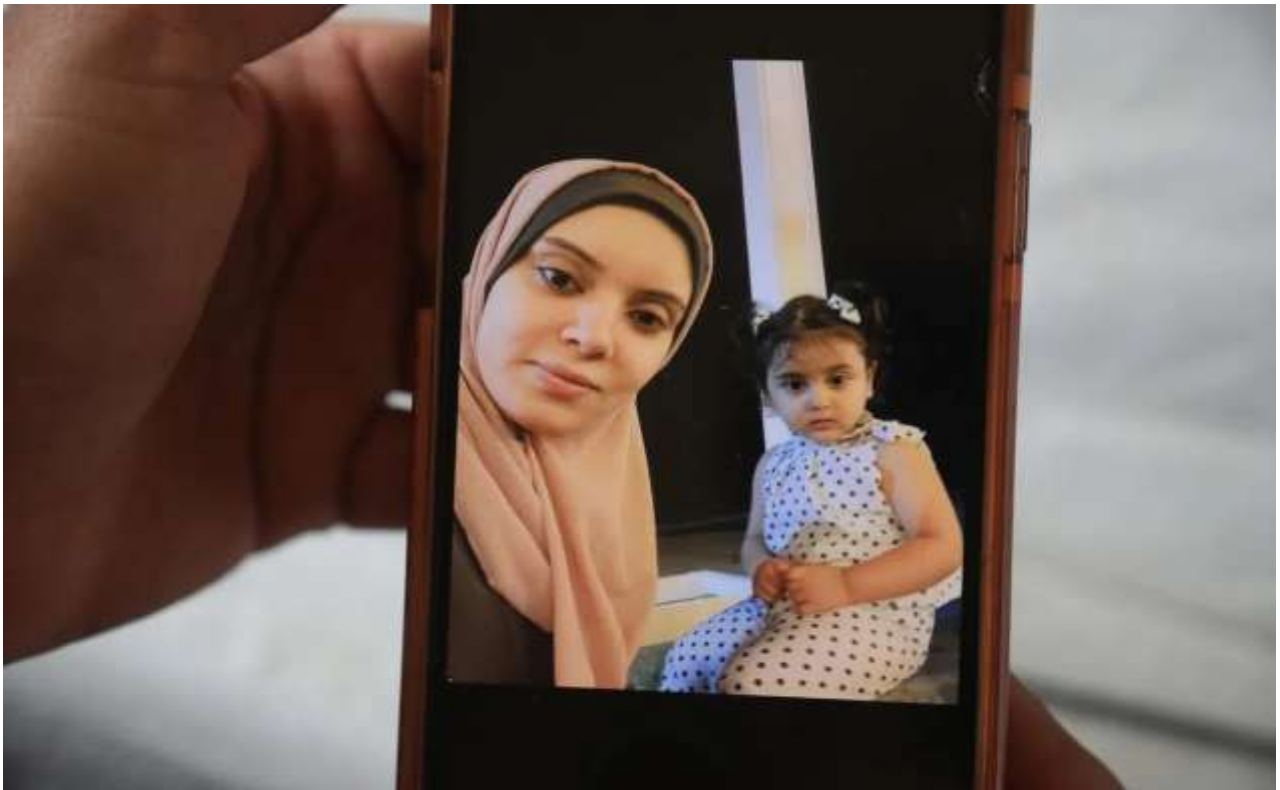
"Some children are so traumatized by what they've just lived through that they can't even speak. Not even their names." (Ebraheem Matar, former intern at Al-Aqsa Hospital, in Deir-Al-Balah)

How are they registered in such cases? "We assign them a number to avoid confusion." Hospitals try to keep these children for as long as possible. "Because we know that the first thing their relatives—if they still have any—will do is tour the hospitals, just in case," says Matar.

This is how Jana, Amal and Mohammed's daughter, was eventually found. When she woke up at Al-Chifa, she was silent. Not a word. The medical staff knew nothing about her. By chance, she stayed in the ward until her aunt—who had been searching for the hospitals—arrived and identified her. The young woman took her in and brought her back to the camp in Jabaliya, in northern Gaza. Meanwhile, her father, Mohammed, was taken in by his uncle in the south, where he recovered. Weeks later, when he set out to find his daughter, Israeli soldiers stopped him at a checkpoint. The military was setting up the Netzarim corridor, an enormous checkpoint that prevents any movement between the north and south of Gaza.

This unspoken border is another tragedy for Gaza's residents. Early in the war, many families from the north were divided: fathers stayed behind, sending their wives and children south, believing they would be safer. Now, it's impossible for them to reunite. All trapped, like Mohammed...

'I'm afraid, over time, she will forget me'



Today, he is only 30 kilometres away from Jana, but the corridor separating them is likely one of the most impenetrable in the world. As a result, for nearly 12 months, father and daughter have only communicated via WhatsApp. They talk about everything, nothing. They talk less and less, especially. "I'm afraid that, over time, she will forget me," says the thirty-year-old. On August 23, the little girl celebrated her third birthday alone, in the arms of her aunt. "I was on the other side of the screen." It was a sad celebration, almost tearful, but he kept his composure in front of her.

Does Jana ask about her mother? "No, she says nothing, so..." Mohammed looks away and adds, "So, I prefer not to say anything." We are about to respond, to tell him that there is nothing worse than unspoken words. But we stop ourselves.

Too much sadness to ignite. Sometimes, the thirty-year-old goes to the far end of the camp, "where the network is better," to ask relatives and friends for photos of Amal, Jana, and himself. He no longer has any pictures of the three of them. In the bombing, he lost his phone, and with it, the photos. The life before has been erased. In the evenings, he replays the photos of Jana sent to him by her aunt over and over. But it's no longer enough. Mohammed now wants her, right there, in his arms. Every time he crosses paths with a humanitarian in Al-Mawasi, he talks about Jana. His question is clear: how can I get my daughter back, who is at the Jabaliya camp? The answer is vague, even evasive: "For children in the north, it's complicated..."

No one on the ground has told Mohammed about the "family reunification" programme set up in Gaza since April: being eligible for this programme—coordinated by UNICEF—would allow him to cross the corridor. He is informed about it by SMS. One, two, three times. No reply. He imagines

the worst. A few days later, he sends a message back. “The signal was poor.” He then submits a reunification request right away.

Meanwhile, the 30-year-old continues to search for his son. He has contacted the International Committee of the Red Cross, whose mission includes searching for missing persons. He is gathering all the information that could help trace his whereabouts. Mohammed has, in particular, come across a report from Al-Jazeera, filmed at Al-Shifa hospital four days after the birth of the baby: a nurse is seen mentioning a newborn who was born at the Kamal Adwan hospital and transferred to Al-Shifa for respiratory issues. “A baby without an identity,” she says. Mohammed is convinced it’s his son! He also knows that after the bombing of Al-Shifa hospital in October 2023, newborns from the neonatal unit were sent to Egypt for care. He fears that his child was among those sent. “If he went there, he must have already been adopted... and he will never come back.”

It turns out that it is Bolbol—the doctor who has been talking to us about the “babies from the ruins” for weeks—who supervised the transfer of the infants to Egypt. We try to contact him. No response. We are worried. Usually, he is very responsive.

‘I made him repeat his name many times’

At the end of October, the strikes on the Jabaliya camp intensify, where Jana and her aunt live. The Israeli military suspects Hamas of rebuilding combat units there. “It’s been almost two days since I tried to reach Jana and her aunt, but no answer. The Israeli army is conducting military operations in the north. I am very worried,” writes Mohammed on October 27.

We’re about to comfort him, suggesting it might be “the signal that’s bad.” But at the same time, news agencies report hundreds of deaths in Jabaliya. The rare images filtering from the camp make the opening news broadcast. Apocalypse scenes. What can we say to Mohammed? How can we be reassuring and realistic at the same time? We try several times to find the right words... before giving up. This time, it’s Paris that isn’t responding.

We call UNICEF to check if the victims from the camp have been identified. Negative. At the same time, we ask about the status of the reunification request between Jana and her father, emphasizing that the little girl is in Jabaliya, the epicenter of the horror. UNICEF immediately announces that, among the children waiting for transfer to southern Gaza, those from Jabaliya are a priority. Finally, hope begins to creep in.

The problem is, the humanitarians trying to retrieve Jana can’t reach her aunt. Mohammed is beside himself. In this life shaped by chaos, Jana is no longer just his daughter, she is his only certainty. On November 7, contact is finally re-established. The little girl and her aunt are in the Beit Lahiya area, along with other refugees. Mohammed breathes only halfway. He fears that, during another move, his daughter might get lost and become anonymous again. “I made her repeat her name many times. But will that be enough?”

‘A teddy bear almost as big as she is’

To guard against this risk, UNICEF distributed tens of thousands of bracelets to young children under 6 in Gaza, with their names written on them. This way, no matter what happens, the children have their identity on their wrist. But the bracelets were only distributed in the southern part of the enclave, not in the north. So, Jana doesn’t have one. “Her aunt needs to write her name on her arm. And add a phone number! Also, she should make a sign for her to wear around her neck, with anything, a piece of string, anything...” urges a humanitarian. We pass this on to

Mohammed, who, in turn, passes it along.

Jana's transfer is scheduled for around November 14. If all goes as planned, she will be the 45th child to cross the Netzarim corridor as part of a family reunification.

In six months, fewer than fifty have crossed the checkpoint—very few. And for good reason, permits are difficult to get from the Israeli authorities. After that, the journey is extremely dangerous. It is estimated that around 10% of the munitions dropped on Gaza haven't exploded; experts say it will take nearly fifteen years to clear the enclave. Therefore, before any transfer, UNICEF must meticulously plan the route

There's also the issue of the unexpected. "We're crossing a territory where military operations are ongoing," says Jonathan Crickx, UNICEF's communications director in Palestine. In fact, even inside the armoured 4x4 vehicles, helmets and bulletproof vests are mandatory. In evidence of the risks involved, the parents of the minors being transferred must sign a waiver, just in case.

Last August, one of these UNICEF humanitarians, Salim Oweis, participated in a reunification; he transferred seven children from four different families. He recalls the immense tension, "especially near the checkpoint. That's where, three weeks before our passage, a UNICEF convoy had come under fire." The Jordanian takes risks for children he will only meet once in his life. When asked why he does this work, he responds quickly: "Honestly, when you see their parents, in tears, thanking you a thousand times during the reunions, you know exactly why you're doing this job." With a sunny smile and a bun tightly tied on his head, the thirty-year-old seems at peace, as though convinced he is exactly where he needs to be. And does he remember the children's reactions during the reunions? "Actually, I was surprised, several of them didn't show anything. Nothing at the moment, at least. In fact, they're not capable of facing that much emotion."

At the Al-Mawasi camp, Mohammed imagines being with Jana. To celebrate the event, he bought her a giant stuffed animal. The Gazan, living off the savings from his past life, paid 70 dollars for it. A real scam. But it doesn't matter, for her, nothing is too good. "It's a teddy bear almost as big as she is." He will soon be disillusioned.

That week, priority is given to another convoy: a family of four, victims of a bombing in the northern part of the enclave. The parents died on the spot, and two of the children are seriously injured. Their cousins, living in the south, offered to take them in, and a hospital there gave the green light to receive the two injured. It's decided, they will go before Jana. Her transfer is postponed to Sunday, November 17. On that day, at the last minute, the Israelis cancel the operation. Another setback for Mohammed. We imagine him, downcast, back in his tent with his too-big teddy bear.

"Before, I couldn't sleep because I was so scared. Now, I can't sleep because I'm so happy!"

Mohammed Labbad

UNICEF tries the transfer again the next day. This time, it goes through. In the afternoon, Jana crosses the checkpoint. "She is with her dad. Mission accomplished," texts Jonathan Crickx. Mohammed writes back immediately: "I found my beloved daughter. Extraordinary reunion." The next day, we receive a second text sent at 2:57 a.m.: "Thank you for your help. Thank you for your support. Thank you so much." Has he not slept? "No! Before, I couldn't sleep because I was so scared. Now, I can't sleep because I'm so happy!" he says, laughing through tears, during a video call. Jana is in his lap. She clings to her father, and he to her.

'She acted like a clown, she even laughed!'



How did the reunion go? Mohammed doesn't know where to begin, stumbling over his words, mixing Arabic and English... Honestly, it's hard to understand. He takes a breath and rearranges his words: "It was incredible! Incredible. At first, when she saw me, she didn't say anything. And that lasted... what... a good hour. That's normal, right? The shock. Then, she said a few words. And after, she acted like a clown, she even laughed. She laughed!" He repeats the word, as if he himself can't believe it.

Jana, still sitting on his lap, watches the exchange as a spectator. Her two dark eyes stare at you, as if to say: "Who are you?" There's distance in her gaze, likely her form of armour. At just 3 years old, she has already survived so much... the death of her mother, the bombing of her home, fleeing Jabaliya under the bombs, and now, her father reappearing suddenly after a year's absence.

Fortunately, at the checkpoint, the Israelis allowed her aunt, her "second mom," to pass through. The young woman sets up a tent near Mohammed's. This made the transition easier for the little one. In a few days, a UNICEF team will come, as they do after every transfer, to see "how the child is adjusting to her new environment" and offer psychological support. "I would like to thank these humanitarian workers for the rest of my life," Mohammed says before hanging up. He promises to call again in a few days.

On November 25, Bolbol reappears. The doctor has found the documents — which he sends to us — about the 28 infants transferred to Egypt a year earlier. He is certain: Mohammed's son was not part of the convoy. "We only sent those with an identity to Cairo. On the day of departure, I had three anonymous babies in the ward, and they stayed in Gaza."

All three were transferred to the south of the enclave, to the UAE hospital in Rafah — a city still spared from bombs at the time. What happened to them afterward? "Among them, there was a girl who was adopted by a nurse," the doctor lists. "There was a boy who was reunited with his father through the International Red Cross." And the last one? "I... I don't know. Give me some time to look for him."

His commitment to “his” babies, as he sometimes calls them, seems total. “They’re like my family.” Nasser is very critical of his colleagues, the doctors who fled abroad in recent months. “For me, leaving is betrayal. I think I’d rather die than betray.”

‘We only have one meal a day’

Regarding the “babies of the ruins,” he believes there should be “DNA tests, and in large numbers, after the war.” Why wait? The fate of these children is being decided now. At this moment, Nasser’s eyes widen, and he scolds you: “But, come on, you can see it’s impossible! We’re running out of everything! We don’t even have gas anymore: to cook food, we have to go chop wood. We’ve gone back 300 years! So, DNA tests...”

Regarding the “babies of the ruins,” “DNA tests will need to be conducted, and in large numbers, after the war.” (Nasser Bolbol)

The Gazan admits to being exhausted. It’s the endless war, the hunger that gnaws at him: “Right now, we only get one meal a day. And it’s always rice. I can’t take rice anymore.” He smiles and adds, with his booming voice: “My dream would be...” We wait for his words, expecting something grand. But no. “My dream would be a pack of cigarettes. Something with a lot of nicotine!” In the enclave, where everything arrives in dribs and drabs — including food and medicine — tobacco has nearly disappeared. The few packs still circulating are sold for about 700 dollars.

Before leaving Nasser, we ask if we can share his contact details with Mohammed, still searching for his son. “Of course, I’d be happy to help.”

‘A whole new life is starting’

We send Nasser’s number to Jana’s father, who calls right away. By his side, we see the little girl, all smiles, surrounded by a bunch of kids. She looks like a star. The first time she arrived at the camp, in her father’s arms, some filmed the event. Good news is so rare here.

Mohammed is aware of the difficulties ahead; he’s particularly worried about “the coming winter, with the illnesses and everything.” However, it’s nothing compared to what he was just a few weeks ago. Jana’s return has brought him back to life. He keeps repeating: “It’s going to be okay, it’s going to be okay.”

Next to him, we see Jana making “boom, boom” sounds while aiming at the sky. Her father grabs her hand and scolds her. Embarrassed, he says, as if excusing his little girl: “It’s not her fault. She plays at war because she sees it everywhere here.” She snuggles into his arms; he’s no longer angry. He showers her with kisses, whispering “Habibi, habibi, habibi” (“My love, my love, my love”).

Mohammed dreams of the best for her: a real house, a great education, etc. Jana already has a little pink backpack, so girly. There’s no kindergarten in sight, though. “We’ll figure out a way with other parents to do school,” her father says. “I want her to want for nothing, I want to give her everything.” Giving her happiness, maybe not... but building something close to it, for sure. “It’s a whole new life starting. A whole new one,” he repeats with a huge smile.

We say goodbye as he picks up his daughter and grabs his water jug.

It’s time to go get drinking water.