



REUTERS, BY ABU MUSTAFA

Palestinian children fill bottles with water from a public tap in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip on October 26, 2009. There are allegations by humanitarian workers that Israeli restrictions prevented Palestinians from receiving enough water in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

'We want to live in peace'

Isdud Al Najjar honored for her work with Mercy Corps in Palestine

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

It took two months, international negotiations, and U.S. escorts to extract Isdud Al Najjar from the barricaded city of Gaza and bring her to Portland. For weeks she was a captive of the conflict between the Israeli and Palestinian governments that has shut Gaza off from the rest of the world.

But Gaza is her home, and her family is there, and she knows she will have no trouble getting back in.

The ordeal illustrates only some of the conditions Najjar works under as the program manager for economic recovery in the Gaza Strip. She spearheaded the agency's humanitarian work in the region when Israel and Hamas, the Palestinian party that won control of Gaza, erupted into war, killing 14 Israelis and an estimated 1,300 Palestinians while

creating an imprisoned region for 1.5 million more.

She arrived in Portland to be honored with Mercy Corps' Ellsworth Culver Leadership Award for her work in a city literally cut off economically and socially by the Israeli and Palestinian conflict. In Gaza, unemployment is more than 40 percent, communities lie in rubble for want of building materials, and nearly all of the people rely on international assistance for basic needs such as food. Eighty percent of Gaza's population lives below the poverty line.

During the fighting, Najjar led the distribution of food and blankets, and helped establish recovery and post-trauma programs for children. In the aftermath of the war, Najjar leads Mercy Corps' programs to help rebuild the Gazan economy, including the Cash-for-Work program that employs seamstresses, cooks,

and repair specialists for farming and fishing equipment to help offset the paralyzing unemployment.

We spoke with Najjar during her brief stay in Portland, a few days before she and her 4-month-old son returned to Gaza at the end of October.

Joanne Zuhl: I understand simply getting here was a major undertaking, what happened?

Isdud Al Najjar: No one can imagine it because it is so difficult. Until you experience it. Just to get outside of Gaza I need an Israeli permit. I need to cross a crossing point that connects Gaza with Israel. It's not easy to get it. It's only for international human aid or social workers who can get in and out, or if you have severe health problems and need help.

When I get out of Gaza, I have to also get out through Jordan. When you get out of one, you worry that you can't get out of the next one at the right time. If I am late, the crossing will be closed and I'll lose my permit for that date. You get only one day to get through. So when I get back, I'll have to call the Israelis to get the permit for that day to get from Jordan to the West Bank and then from the West Bank into Gaza.

J.Z.: So an average resident of Gaza is basically trapped.

I.A.N.: The 1.5 million, they cannot go. Because I'm working for an international organization and I'm an aid worker, they can issue me a permit. But generally, it's been almost impossible. Going back is much easier.

J.Z.: What is an average day like for a resident of Gaza?

I.A.N.: We have more than 40 percent unemployment in Gaza, so most people are poor people and they don't have anything to do, actually. They chat with their neighbors and sit outside their houses. If they have land, they take care of their land. Eighty percent of the households in Gaza are relying on assistance from the international community, which means that only 20 percent can get their own food. The other

80 percent rely on food assistance from an international agency. They cannot afford their own food. At the crossing points, they are allowing these supplies in. But when they close the crossing points, and there's a scarcity of food, people panic — mothers more than fathers because the mothers are taking more of the burden on their

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shoulders because of the unemployment. You have domestic violence because men can become violent on the women and kids. When we have closed borders, people just go mad because they are afraid of the scarcity of food items. They depend on them for their basic needs.

J.Z.: How does that level of unemployment affect the community, the society?

I.A.N.: As a direct result of the unemployment, we have seen an increase in domestic violence. We see an increase in kids who are selling something in the streets. It was once difficult to find kids in the street selling tissues or something, or begging for money. But these days, this is increasing, because families are pushing their kids to go. And there is also an increase in drop-outs from the school, and this has led to a kind of gender discrimination, because if a family is to choose how to educate, they will educate their son and not educate their daughter, because the son could work and help the family, and the daughter will just get



Isdud Al Najjar