

Israel and Gaza—the civilians' distress

By DALIA HARPAZ & BEN KAMINSKY
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TEL AVIV—For eight years, residents of the southern town of Sderot have been experiencing daily rocket attacks from Hamas. The ongoing fear, lack of certainty and anxiety have turned life in Sderot traumatic. Last week, after the beginning of the latest IDF operation in the Gaza Strip, the big southern cities of Ashdod, Ashqelon and Beer-Sheba have been put in a similar situation.

In this current situation, volunteers and institutions are trying hard to help maintain hope for the civilians who are forced to live in daily fear of Qassam rockets falling on their homes and families.

Neighbors help evacuate an elderly woman following a terrorist rocket attack on the southern Israeli city of Sderot, December 30, 2008. (Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images)

"I am a local resident and also work here with traumatized people," said Yehudit Bar Hai, who works as a volunteer at NTL (Israeli Trauma Center for Victims of Terror and War) in Sderot. "Three years ago we set up a unique plan called Car Patrol—psychologists and other professionals who treat people at their homes. The psychologists visit different towns, winter or summer, and under any circumstance. The patrol car didn't stop working even when there are very serious incidents taking place."

"This is not a one-time event such as an accident, Bar Hai continued. "We're talking about eight years here, and dealing with the surprise factor. [The rocket attacks] can happen anywhere and at any time," she clarifies. "You can be sitting with a friend at a coffee-shop and suddenly there is a Red Alert (rockets alarm). Your heart misses two beats, you check to see that your head is still connected to your shoulders, and you call everyone to see if they're OK. I might be shopping, and suddenly there is a Red Alert, and people just panic. I leave my cart and help people out."

Bar Hai knows first-hand what it is like to be the victim of a rocket attack.

"My car was once hit by a Qassam rocket while I was shopping. The people who are injured are people that we know, people who are close to me and to my husband. We know their kids, we are familiar with their homes that get bombarded."

"In the midst of all this, we try to run a normal life, try to live in this nightmarish situation. The hardest feeling is when I meet people who can't seem to find any hope.

This is a certain sign of a traumatic situation."

Chen Avrahams, a resident in one of the Kibbutz settlement surrounding the Gaza Strip, said, "From a humanistic stand point, the situation isn't simple. No offense to Gaza Strip residents who are also being bombarded right now, but living for eight long years under rocket attacks isn't simple."

"My son and I went to my sister's place to get outside the range of the rockets, but yesterday this place also came into the rockets' range, and the alarm was sounded there too."

"We can't go back home," Avrahams added. "On Tuesday night there was a mortar attack on the Kibbutz at 2 a.m., and there was a direct hit on a house where a girl was sleeping. Last Saturday, while visiting my sister's, mortar shells fell on both sides of our house at the Kibbutz. There is no way of hiding from it; therefore there is no other choice but to pack up and move to a place which is safe, or at least safer for the time being."

Empowering the children

Many organizations have come to Sderot in order to support the residents in different ways. One newly founded organization aims to turn victims into active contributors, and to turn takers into givers.

Dr. Anna Geifman, of Boston University, one of the project's initiators told The Epoch Times last week that the project's goal is to prevent the residents from becoming passive and needy. The project intends to make children understand that their unique experience and point of view can help others too.

Assisting others, explains Geifman, will give children inner strength. It can manifest in small things, such as cleaning public areas or planting trees and flowers. "And that demonstrates another important idea—whatever you invest, you will receive," she explained.

"We don't want the children to think they are victims, no matter what happens or how hard the situation is," she said. There are other ways to contribute; for example, explaining the situation of the residents of Sderot to the international community."

Geifman also told of other organizations that take similar measures. Teenaged girls at a religious high school in Sderot have recently put on a play, in English, as part of their curriculum. The girls tell their personal stories, and also interact with the audience. "It isn't like a psychological treatment," she says. "Their roles are very active."

"The amazing thing is that they turn the situation upside down, and



Emergency personnel treat a man injured by terrorist rocket attacks in the Israeli city of Ashkelon. THE ISRAELI PROJECT

say that they will not become victims, they will not become pawn in the hands of the Hamas," Geifman says. She says that despite the suffering, real occasions of heroism can be seen.

Geifman is also a volunteer teacher in Sderot. Her goal is that the children will not always think about the Qassam rockets flying through the air. "They should grow intellectually, live normal life and grow. The only way to really help them is to turn them from passive receiver into active contributors."

The suffering in Gaza

Haggai Matar is one of the organizers of a demonstration against the military operation in Gaza. He is an activist and a dissenter of conscience, who served a long prison sentence for refusing to serve in the Israeli army.

"We simply know that in order to solve this issue, it is not right to be dragged into more violence," he said. He said that the siege on Gaza had caused total disruption of lives of the people living in Gaza.

"There is no cement for the most minor construction and repair.

Everyone knows of the shortages of water, food, electricity and fuel. There is no export of goods—the economy is absolutely suffocated. This situation has been going on for a very long time, and has been initiated by Israel, with the support of the European Union and the United States. A warehouse of pharmaceuticals was bombarded yesterday, hospitals are collapsing, there is no more room left in the cemeteries, and the sewage is flooding the streets. This reaction isn't beneficial, will not solve anything, and is not proportional."

Chen Avrahams understands this, but sees why the IDF mission had to take place.

"This situation is very complex," he said. "In the midst of all this, the ones who suffer the most are the civilian groups on both sides. I understand that the military operation was inevitable because it was necessary to put an end to this ongoing torture, but I deeply regret that it hadn't been possible to reach negotiations, and that it is taking so many lives. I am glad though, that Israel is still sending food and drugs into Gaza."



Neighbors help evacuate an elderly woman following a terrorist rocket attack on the southern Israeli city of Sderot, December 30, 2008. JACK GUEZ/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

U.K. missionaries sentenced to hard labor in Gambia

By CHRISTOPHER MAILBY
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Two Christian missionaries in The Republic of Gambia in South Africa have been sentenced to one year's hard labor after pleading guilty to distributing a letter criticizing Gambia's government.

The U.K. couple, who have an adopted 2-year-old daughter, have 20 days to appeal against their sentence in one of Africa's smallest countries.

Mr. David Fulton from Troon in Ayrshire, Scotland, and his wife, Fiona, from Torquay in Devon, England, apologized and admitted the seditious in the hope of a favorable verdict from the magistrate.

"Any lawyer will tell you if you plead guilty to a charge, the court is more likely to treat you with leniency because ... you have not wasted the court's time and ... you have not put the state to the trouble and expense of having a full-blown trial," their counsel told the BBC's Focus on Africa.

However, the magistrate, Idrissa Mbai, said: "I found the offenses of the accused party to be very shocking and they have shown no respect for the country, the government, and the president of the republic."

"In this country there is a law that one has to obey, whether Gambian or non-Gambian."

At the time of their arrest Mr. Fulton, a previous British army major, had been working as a chaplain to Gambia's military. His wife looked after terminally ill people and visited women in their homes and in hospitals.

The couple met 20 years ago when he was serving a sentence for armed robbery in Channings Wood jail in

England. She was a prison visitor talking to inmates about Christianity. They have been in Gambia for 12 years.

After their arrest on Nov. 29, Mr. Fulton was put in solitary confinement at the high-security Mile Two prison outside Banjul. His wife was held with their 2-year-old adopted daughter Elizabeth at a police station in the capital. The couple's two other children, Iona, 20, and Luke, 17, are studying in Exeter, England.

After moving to the country with his wife and children, Mr. Fulton established a branch of the Christian organization Prison Fellowship International in The Gambia and worked in the Gambian prison system.

An article from Prison Fellowship International, in August 2004, states that a prisoner claimed Mr. Fulton was trying to convert prison inmates to Christianity. He was subsequently offered the post of chaplain to the Gambian military.

The country is a former British colony which became independent in 1965. It has been ruled by the same regime since 1994 when Lieutenant Yahya Jammeh claimed the presidency following a bloodless coup.

Despite recent elections being given clean bill of health foreign observers, an Amnesty report said, "Lawyers are reluctant to take on human rights cases for fear of reprisals and families of victims are afraid to speak out. The media, for the most part, censors itself in the face of arrests, fines, threats and physical attacks on those accused of criticizing the government. All public protests have ceased."

The Fulton's 2-year-old daughter will be looked after by friends.

Another Tibet—Uighur mirrors the issues in Tibet

By MATTHIAS KEHREIN and FLORIAN GODOVITS
Epoch Times Staff

The Uighurs, a nine million Muslim minority, residing in Eastern Turkistan in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, are one of the most abused people at the hands of the Chinese regime.

In contrast to worldwide awareness of problems in Tibet, the Western media and politicians give little attention to these people's dilemmas. This might be due to cleverly manipulated Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda, making people believe the Uighurs are allied with a network of Al Qaeda operatives.

The Uighurs have now chosen a spokesperson who shares the same charisma as the Tibetan leader—Rebiya Kadeer, once China's wealthiest woman. She was a respected businesswoman back in the 1990s and was elected to speak before the National People's Congress in Beijing on behalf of the Xinjiang Region. She chose not to hide her people's plight before the Chinese leadership and eventually found herself in solitary confinement in a Xinjiang forced labor camp, in China. Her ordeal lasted six years. She would hear agonizing screams from youths in neighboring cells whose will the abusers tried to break.

She is untiringly championing the cause of her people, in spite of threats and intimidation for those of her eleven children who had opted to remain in Xinjiang. [Please see addendum at the end of this interview]

The Uighur World Congress took place in Berlin, Germany between April 21 and 23, 2008. Rebiya Kadeer spoke with us about the plight of the Uighurs, her hopes, her views on the international community, and the parallels between her country and Tibet.

Epoch Times (ET): Why do so few Western media outlets report about the Uighurs and so much about Tibet?

Rebiya Kadeer (RK): The main reason is the Dalai Lama, who had raised so much awareness in the West these past years. He was fortunate to flee with some of his people and his government. Since he is also the Tibetan spiritual head, people recognized him as Tibet's leader.

For us, the Soviets coerced the Uighur leadership to negotiate with Mao, and they were supposed to fly to mainland China. There were assertions the plane had exploded, and seven Uighur leaders—the president and other ministers—were killed. Since then, the Soviets/Chinese control our territory. Our political administration was unable to flee.

Following that, the Chinese regime dispersed all other Uighurs who could have become leaders, making it impossible to select one overall leader for all the worldwide Uighur organizations.

The Chinese regime had dispatched numerous spies and informants in this game of "Divide and Conquer." But this time, following China's severe, grave suppression, the Uighurs have decided to unite. The international community and media had shown Tibet enough interest during the past few years. I am now the voice for the Uighurs.

Following the Tibetan protests, mostly Uighur women staged peaceful protests in Hotan on March 23 and 24. The Uighurs are convinced that should Tibet become free, we will also become free! Although the general public is largely unaware of our plight, politicians and scientists know of our dilemma. Even China looks upon us as a sensitive/delicate problem to deal with.

ET: What has it been like since

the protests?

RK: Right now the circumstances are horrible. Chinese agents hunt down Uighurs and incarcerate them. Sometimes these CCP people go house-to-house, searching—abominable!

ET: Were there other recent demonstrations in East-Turkistan?

RK: Uighurs have protested the Chinese regime since the CCP had occupied our nation. The head judge of the highest court declared during a January 18, 2008 conference that there were 1,013 instances of unrest. That shows that similar protests have happened. The official line is that these were all "anti-government or separatists' activities."

ET: Forty-five Uighurs were arrested and accused of having planned terrorist activities; what is your opinion?

RK: Because of the events in Tibet, China has lost her credibility around the world. The world pays much attention to China. Now, China aims to draw attention away from herself.

Concurrently, the Chinese people focus on the regime's action at home, because the CCP hopes to direct the population's attention and sentiments toward [a new-found] nationalism, away from the regime's problems. The best "out" the regime had was the Uighurs. The regime once again deceived the Chinese population into believing Uighurs were terrorists, creating the whole story by concocting this plot.

Initially, the Chinese regime insisted the airplane explosion and death of the Uighur politicians was factual, but never provided any evidence or proof. Following that, they arrested 45 of us, claiming these 45 wanted to abduct foreign journalists, reporters, and tourists. The CCP regime attempted to make these 45 of our countrymen appear to be like Bin Laden followers.

The anti-terrorist effort is a worldwide quest. That would have demanded of the CCP regime to prompt an international investigation to determine if these suspected terrorists are what the regime claimed them to be.

Nevertheless, the Uighurs are banned from ever engaging legal representation to defend themselves against unfounded accusations. The Chinese regime would extract confessions under torture, to make the unjustly accused confess things they had never done; even Uighurs detained at Guantanamo were found innocent! If the 45 in question were tried according to international law, I am convinced they would be found innocent.

ET: What could the West do to help Uighur?

RK: My hope for the long run is for the international community to consider our problem the way the Tibetan situation is handled. The international community could send investigation teams and reporters to discover what is happening with the Uighurs; to urge the Chinese during bilateral dialogue to respect our rights; to have Western leaders meet with us and express their empathy with our plight; to negotiate with the Chinese regime for a peaceful solution to our concerns. It would be marvelous if Western nations could dispatch teams to inspect our prisons and execution chambers; to witness how Chinese nationals torture and execute our people. The world needs to know!

Following incarceration at the hands of Chinese Communist rulers for allegedly having connections to national separatist activities, Ms. Kadeer was released into U.S. custody on March 15, 2005 and has since lived in Washington, D.C. with her family, except for her children who are still in Xinjiang, as mentioned in the above article