

# ***Georgina Newman: Hope at last as Jewish settlers move out***

There will be celebrations in Gaza today as Palestinians wave goodbye to all but a few of the diehard settlers who have illegally occupied land in Gaza since the 1967 war. And let's face it, Palestinians have had very little to party about over the past half century.

I spent most of 2002 living in Gaza City, the epicentre of the Arab-Israeli conflict, before moving to Auckland.

My evenings were spent cowering and questioning my life choices as Israeli warplanes and helicopters bombarded my neighbourhood, most of which had been reduced to rubble long before I arrived.

My small apartment offered a grandstand view of the drama. It was a few minutes' walk from Yasser Arafat's compound, which had been bombed scores of times.

Air raids usually began in the evening and would last for hours. On such nights I slept on the floor underneath the window in case the glass got blown in, as it did several times.

The pullout of Jewish settlers is hoped to end the circle of violence on the Strip.

And no one longs for peace more than Gaza's children, who make up about half of the 1.9 million population.

After years of conflict they have come to know of no other life. According to the United Nations Children's Fund, almost a thousand children have died because of the conflict in the past five years.

Gaza has raised a traumatised generation that witnesses death and destruction on a daily basis. Because of curfews and shelling many lose out on health care and an education.

Now, for the children - who have grown up in the most tense, isolated and densely populated place on Earth - I hope peace may return.

As an aid worker I spent a lot of time in the schools. The heavy toll the conflict had taken on these children was obvious.

Kids were gaunt and withdrawn and their young faces etched with tension.

The children instinctively knew to drop to the ground when they heard gunfire. When given coloured pencils and paper, without fail all of the children drew morbid scenes of burning tyres and dead people covered in blood. It's harrowing stuff.

The statistics show why. One in five children have witnessed a friend being killed, one in four have been exposed to firing and shelling while at school.

In the first four months of this year, three children have been killed and a further 13 have had limbs blown off by land mines that lie along the Strip.

Sickeningly, many of these devices are hidden in broken toys or old Coke cans that attract children's attention.

While I was taking a film crew around Khan Younis the cameraman filmed a child playing in the rubble. As I walked over I realised the child had an unexploded bomb in his hand.

He threw it with all his might against a brick wall. Miraculously it didn't explode. I later found it had a 30m kill zone. We would all have died had it exploded.

Ten-year-old Ahmad was not so lucky. On his way home from school in Rafah he picked up an innocuous-looking canister and started to bang it with a stone.

His cousin became suspicious of the device and urged Ahmad to throw it away, but the plea came too late. It exploded, sending shards of shrapnel into Ahmad's stomach, hand and legs.

Swift medical intervention managed to stop the bleeding, but Ahmad was left with with permanent damage to his hand, and emotional trauma.

The once curious, playful boy turned inward and became unmotivated. He suffers from nightmares and no longer goes outside to play.

The Gaza Strip is only 45km long and ranges between 5 and 12km in width. The population density is extremely high, with 3600 people per kilometre, compared with just 14 people in New Zealand.

Even though there are well over a million Palestinians to only 8000 settlers, more than 30 per cent of the land area is controlled by Israeli settlements and military installations.

Gaza is literally a prison within a prison. The area has been separated into three main parts and moving between them is a nightmare. If you think traffic is bad in Auckland, try Gaza.

Potentially you could travel the length of Gaza in under an hour, but the journey has been known to take up to 10 days. Gaza is littered with checkpoints that open and close randomly.

I was once stuck at a checkpoint overnight, until Israeli soldiers realised a car in the convoy was carrying Western journalists.

Within minutes the checkpoint was reopened.

These checkpoints have devastated the economy, which is largely agricultural. The transportation of produce from farmers in southern Gaza to markets is impossible as food rots in roadblocks in the scorching heat.

Today the majority of Palestinians live on less than \$2 a day - not enough to keep a family healthy. One in 10 children are stunted.

A third of Palestinians cannot get to health clinics or doctors because of closure, checkpoints and curfews.

In certain parts of Gaza there is 80 per cent unemployment.

Even the delivery of aid is hampered, with humanitarian organisations unable to reach people to offer desperately needed services.

Hopefully, the whole of the Gaza strip will become a safer, freer place for children now that the settlers, and the huge military presence with snipers on watchtowers that protected them, are going.

I remember asking a young woman with rotten teeth and swollen, bleeding gums why she hadn't gone to an aid clinic. She simply shrugged and said, "Who cares about sore teeth when you get shot at every day?" Maybe now she can see a dentist.

\* Georgina Newman is communications manager for Unicef NZ.