

Palestinian doctor's tragedy prompts Gaza education plans

(Print Version)

Nathan Jeffay
Tel Aviv

One of the unforgettable events of last year's war in Gaza was the killing by the Israel Defence Forces of three daughters of a Palestinian gynaecologist who worked in Israel but lived in Gaza and who was a long term supporter of Arab-Israeli coexistence (BMJ 2009;338:b213).

Now Izzeldin Abuelaish has spoken to the BMJ to describe how he feels about last year's events and what he is planning for the future. Revisiting Israel from his present home in Canada, he said that he thought his daughters' deaths had been of crucial importance in ending the war. "The blood of my daughters was a price that saved others' lives," he said.

Dr Abuelaish thinks that the attack put Palestinian suffering higher on the Israeli and the international agenda and had an immediate effect. The next day Israel's then prime minister, Ehud Olmert, announced a unilateral ceasefire. Israel has never said that the announcement was connected to his tragedy, but Dr Abuelaish is sure that it had an effect.

He said, "Olmert announced the unilateral ceasefire after he saw what happened, so it saved lives." He has set up an international foundation in memory of his daughters to enable women in the Middle East to attend a liberal arts college, which he hopes to set up in Gaza.

He is planning to sue the Israeli Ministry of Defence in a case that may end up in Israel's Supreme Court. Any compensation will go to his foundation.

On 16 January 2009 the world learnt of Dr Abuelaish's tragedy in dramatic fashion. Long involved in medical work in both Gaza and Israel, he called a journalist acquaintance who was broadcasting live on Israeli television to tell him that the army had just attacked his home.

During the attack viewers heard Dr Abuelaish describe the death moments before of his three daughters, Bisan (aged 20 years),

Mayar (15), and Aya (13). "They died on the spot, on the spot . . . Oh Lord, God, God, God!"

A fourth daughter, 17 year old Shadah, was badly injured. On hearing the man's cries of anguish, Ehud Olmert said he wept.

On Tuesday 19 January this year Dr Abuelaish took a taxi ride from Tel Aviv to the Israel-Gaza border, part of the final leg of a journey to visit his daughters' graves in Gaza. He said that his Muslim faith had taught him that God planned everything and that even if you did not like something it might be for good.

He now lives in Toronto and is a professor of global health at the University of Toronto. The journey back was his first since he left Gaza in July.

Dr Abuelaish said that moving to Toronto had provided a much needed chance to "get some rest" from the reality he faced in Gaza: the hardships of the blockade, the difficulty of living in the shadow of his tragedy, and his difficult work patterns.

"The most important thing is to be always with my children," he said, referring to his five surviving children, whose mother died shortly before the Gaza war. He explained that when he used to travel from Gaza to work in Tel Aviv he would stay there for several nights, causing him to be apart from his family.

However, he sees his move to Toronto as temporary and said that he plans to return to Gaza within five years.

The Israeli army, which conducted a two and a half week investigation into the incident, said last February that it considered the Abuelaish girls to have been casualties of Hamas's tactic of fighting from among civilians (BMJ 2009;338:b523).

The army claimed that soldiers saw suspicious figures on the third floor of the building, which is where the girls were, and believed the figures were fighters observing Israeli forces in order to direct sniper fire from another building—a method that they say Hamas used during the operation.

But Dr Abuelaish has maintained ever since the attack that the army should admit it made a mistake.

He believes that the Ministry of Defence has a moral obligation to give him an apology. He also thinks it has an obligation to

compensate him financially for his loss, and his lawyer is starting to put together a case that may end up in Israel's Supreme Court.

If he is successful, Dr Abuelaish said, any money he is awarded will go to an international foundation that he has established, called Daughters for Life, which is raising funds to enable women from the Middle East to attend university.

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