

Neighbors mourn deaths of 21 family members in Gaza home fire

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Fire in Gaza kills 21 / Photo AFP via Getty Images

Gaza City, November 18 (RHC)-- As soon as she heard the news that a fire had broken out in the building where her sister lived, Aya Abu Rayya ran down the street towards it, screaming, "My sister, my sister."

When she arrived, all she could do was watch as the flames consumed the building where her sister and extended family had lived.

“I was screaming hysterically. My sister and her children were gone. People around me were trying to calm me down and tell me they would be fine,” Aya, 23, told Al Jazeera. “I was saying to them how are they going to be OK while you see these horrible flames?”

Her sister Areej, 36, had died in the fire along with her sister’s husband and five children – four daughters and a son. Areej’s mother-in-law, Yosra Abu Rayya, and father-in-law, Subhi Abu Rayya, as well as their children and grandchildren also died in the fire.

A total of 21 people were killed as the fire ripped through the four-storey residential building in the densely populated Jabalia refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip on Thursday evening. Gaza’s Ministry of Interior said an initial investigation revealed that large amounts of petrol had been stored at the site, fuelling the blaze that quickly engulfed the building. Hamas, which governs Gaza, said a wide investigation is under way to determine the cause of the fire.

“Areej is my only sister, and her children are like my children. I come to visit her almost every day at home. We were planning to visit them today because her husband, Maher, came home from a trip a few days ago.” Aya said.

“What happened is a catastrophic tragedy by all standards. No one was able to save them. Life in Gaza is oppression upon oppression.” she added. The bodies of the 21 victims were buried during a mass public funeral following the Friday prayer.

On Friday, the community in which the fire took place was in shock, and authorities issued an official declaration of mourning. In the house where women were mourning, Subhi Abu Rayya’s sister Khitam Abu Rayya, 56, was visibly stunned by the death of so many members of her family.

“I can’t put into words to describe our shock last night.” said the woman who was barely able to speak. “I lost my dearest brother, his wife, sons and daughters, and their kids, including my seven-year-old granddaughter, Dima.” “It’s as if we were destined in Gaza to live in more and more pain,” she said.

Neighbors gathered outside the building where the fire took place [Abdelhakim Abu Riash/Al Jazeera] Outside the burned building, several neighbourhood residents gathered from early morning Friday until late at night.

Ahmed Ezzedine, 30, was one of the first on the scene when the fire started. “I was sitting with my family, until I heard sounds of screaming and pleading as if it was in my house. I immediately left my house to check the matter, to find a child and a woman screaming on the upper floor of our neighbours’ home, asking for help, amidst the flames of fire around them.”

“It was a scene that we cannot forget. The child and the woman disappeared minutes later into the fire,” he said, adding that he and other neighbours tried desperately to put out the fire with extinguishers.

Ezzedine said that, eventually, civil defence crews arrived, but the fire continued out of control for approximately an hour and a half. “If this fire was in a developed country, it would have been brought under control within minutes,” he said. “Unfortunately, capabilities in Gaza are completely regressing in all service and government sectors, and the result is we are losing more victims due to inhumane conditions here.”

Saqr Ali, 40, who lives in the house adjacent to the fire, said that the tragedy shows that “Gaza has become a graveyard for its residents and unlivable place.” “I was not at home when the fire broke out, as I was out with my family to enjoy the weekend, but it was only moments until I received a call stating that

the house of the Abu Raya family next to my house was burning,” Ali said. “I immediately returned to my house.”

Civil defence crews climbed to the roof of Ali’s home, in an attempt to enter the burning house, but to no avail due to the lack of ladders and needed equipment. “Whatever the reasons are, the inhumane conditions in which the people live here forced them to practices, such as storing fuel and gas due to the crises of closures and power outages.”

“It is true that the incident has nothing to do with politics, but it is a reflection and result of long years of the continuous blockade against us,” Ali said

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