

Group stages die-ins across Washington, DC to raise awareness for Gaza



Washington, November 29 (RHC)-- Julia Fawzi Saeed Al-Kurd was one year old. She was killed along with several members of her family in an Israeli air raid on Deir al-Balah in central Gaza on October 11th.

Her name appeared in local reports on the day of the bombing and later on a list of people killed in Israeli attacks, released by the Palestinian health ministry in Gaza.

As with thousands of other Palestinians who have been wiped out in the Israeli offensive, little is publicly known about Julia beyond her death. Had she uttered her first word? Did she take her first step? What was her favourite toy? What lullaby did her parents sing to put her to sleep?

But in Washington, DC, some activists are trying to keep the memory of children like Julia alive, with a provocative reminder of the young lives lost during the war in Gaza.

On a chilly Sunday morning in the Capitol Hill neighbourhood, the activists protested silently, passing out leaflets to passersby. At their feet were a row of small figures wrapped in white shrouds, each splattered in blood — and each bearing the name of a real child killed in Gaza. Julia's name was on one of them.

"We are witnessing a genocide in Gaza. End the injustice NOW," the flyer read, urging a ceasefire and an end to United States military support for Israel.

The protest was one of daily demonstrations across the Washington area led by an informal group called Die-in for Humanity.

Hazami Barmada organised the protests in an effort to break through pre-conceived notions about the Gaza war, with stark reminders of the humanity of those under siege. Barmada, who is of Palestinian and Syrian descent, estimates the group has handed out more than 14,000 flyers so far.

"The reality is our social media turns into echo chambers and people read the news they want to read," she said. "So we go into places where your average person is walking around and try to provoke deeper questions and reflections on what's happening and more awareness about what's happening to Palestinians."

Israeli attacks have killed more than 15,000 Palestinians since October 7, making the war one of the deadliest conflicts for civilians and children in modern history.

Where possible, Barmada and her fellow volunteers lie on the ground during protests to mirror the bodies of Palestinians killed in Israeli raids. "We really hope that people will stop and actually start to question the toll of war, the toll of endorsing this with our tax dollars," Barmada told Al Jazeera, referring to Washington's military aid to Israel.

She said the protesters want to make people feel "uncomfortable within a controlled environment" in order to spark meaningful conversations. "It's really easy to see statistics online and to divorce yourself from it," Barmada said.

"Our goal is when someone walks by with their own kids, when you see body bags with children's names and ages written on them that are the same age as your kids, it provokes a different type of emotional reaction."

The group has held so-called die-in protests at the White House, State Department and various neighbourhoods throughout the US capital.

Part of the group's goal is to prompt questions about the U.S. role in the conflict. President Joe Biden and his top aides have expressed staunch support for Israel and Washington has not drawn any "red lines" to limit how Israel can use the military aid it receives, according to officials.

Israel, which leading rights groups accuse of imposing apartheid on Palestinians, receives at least \$3.8bn in US aid annually, and Biden is seeking \$14 billion in additional assistance for the country this year.

Barmada called Biden's stance disappointing, saying that the war will be a "stain" on his legacy. "Their handling of this entire issue has not only fuelled fear-mongering, it's also dehumanised Palestinians. It's also fuelled animosity and hatred," she said.

On Capitol Hill on Sunday, many pedestrians nodded approvingly at the protesters or gave them a thumbs up. But Barmada said the reactions were not always positive. Just a day earlier, the protesters faced a profanity-laden, racist tirade from a woman who accused them of terrorism and told Barmada to "go back to whatever fucking country" she came from. A video of that interaction has gone viral on social media.

Barmada said she tries to absorb such anger and hatred without reacting to it.

She told Al Jazeera that she started the die-ins after seeing footage of a Palestinian mother whispering in her dead child's ear in Gaza. It reminded her of how she puts her own child to sleep. "All I could imagine in that moment was: What would I do if that was my son?" she said, struggling to hold back the tears.

Barmada added that her sorrow made her spring into action. "There was no conscious decision. There was no process or plan. It was in that moment of deep despair, I couldn't unsee my own child. And if I can get people here to see their own children, if I can get people here to see their own humanity tied to these body bags, then that to me is a success."

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