

Rafah's children seek warmth in hospital coveralls



Children in Rafah wearing medical overalls to keep out the cold and the rain in Gaza, where thousands are sleeping in makeshift tents [Ruwaida Amer/Al Jazeera]

Rafah, February 28 (RHC)-- Running out of options and solutions, parents in Gaza have resorted to putting their children in the white medical coveralls that were part of COVID-19 PPE kits, in a desperate bid to keep them warm and dry.

Gaza's displaced -- many of them having been forced to move multiple times -- are suffering in the severe winter cold with little to protect them from the elements other than thin tents at best.

For many of the 1.4 million people crammed into Rafah after fleeing other parts of Gaza, the only clothes they own are the ones they are wearing. If these get wet, there is little chance of them drying again in the cold.

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In some areas, teams are distributing white coveralls left over from the pandemic – they are plastic-lined and hold at least some of the damp at bay.

Nour al-Bayouk, 11, in his coveralls, explains that he, his parents and sisters came here from Maan to escape the bombing. “We came here to the [European] hospital to stay in a tent. The tent is very cold and does not protect us from the heavy rain.”

When trucks arrived loaded with the white coveralls, he and his sisters rushed to get some. Now, they live in them – day and night. “I’m warm and the water doesn’t get into my clothes,” says Nour. “I have no alternative clothes at all. If my clothes get wet I won’t find anything else to wear.”

“At first I looked funny and scary. I felt like I looked like a person undergoing an operation, or an astronaut. “I laugh every time I see myself in the car windows.”

Now, it has become a familiar sight, as more children do the same. “The hospital is full of cold tents,” says Nour. “I used to have a room with a warm mattress but we left and came here looking for safety. Every day we hear bombing. The tanks haven’t stopped for a single moment.”

The tanks briefly seemed to have withdrawn from Maan at one point and Nour’s father tried to go to their house for more clothes. “But the quadcopters shot at them and he was unable to reach the house. That’s why we found these suits as an opportunity to save us from the cold and the rain.”

Raeda al-Khair, 35, who is originally from Gaza City in the north, managed to find space for her family in the European Hospital in Rafah in December. They had fled from Khan Younis, where they had been sheltering until the tanks rolled in at the start of December.

She says: “We came here with nothing. We thought we would return to our homes. I slept in the hospital corridors on the tiles; the extreme cold exhausted my body and the bodies of my children.” Her husband put up a makeshift tent of plastic sheeting and some hospital blankets in the yard outside the hospital. But the cold has got worse and the family is struggling.

“When it is raining, I feel like crying because children are getting sick from the cold. Since the beginning of the displacement, my children have never recovered.” Al-Khair saw one of the nearby families dressing their children in the coveralls and decided to do the same.

“She told me it’s lined from the inside and prevents water from entering. It’s a good idea for us as mothers because the children do not have alternative clothes and there is no place to wash or dry them.”

Life in the tents is becoming unbearable, she says. “Two mornings ago, my five-year-old daughter, Salma, woke up wet from the rain falling on her. She was shivering so much from the cold. She was very sick and her temperature was high. “I went out to look for this for her as well because there are many sizes and anyone can wear it.”

Salem Baris, 55, fled to al-Mawasi with his children and grandchildren, including a total of 10 smaller children who are all in white coveralls. He came to this part of Rafah from Khan Younis when it became too dangerous to remain, he told Al Jazeera.

“Suddenly, tanks entered behind Al-Khair Hospital and Al-Aqsa University [in Khan Younis]. I left with my children and grandchildren, more than 10 children with me. “I hadn’t left my house since the beginning of the war, but I was forced to leave because tank shells reached our homes. Clashes were continuing between the army and the resistance and I feared that one of my sons would be injured.

“We stood at the checkpoint waiting for permission until the army allowed us to enter. I was holding my grandson as he looked at the tank and was very afraid. All my grandchildren were afraid because, for the first time, they were seeing tanks and soldiers.”

Baris took his family to join his cousin who had two tents in Rafah. “We arrived and the children were wet from the rain and very sick. They had such severe colds. I found my cousin had many white uniforms and I made the children wear them. They didn’t like it.”

Before the coveralls, Baris said, he had to sit in the sun with the children for hours so their clothes could dry.

“We’re trying to live with the war conditions, but they are very difficult. I hope this nightmare ends and I can go home soon.”

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