eSIMs: Connecting Gaza to the world during blackouts
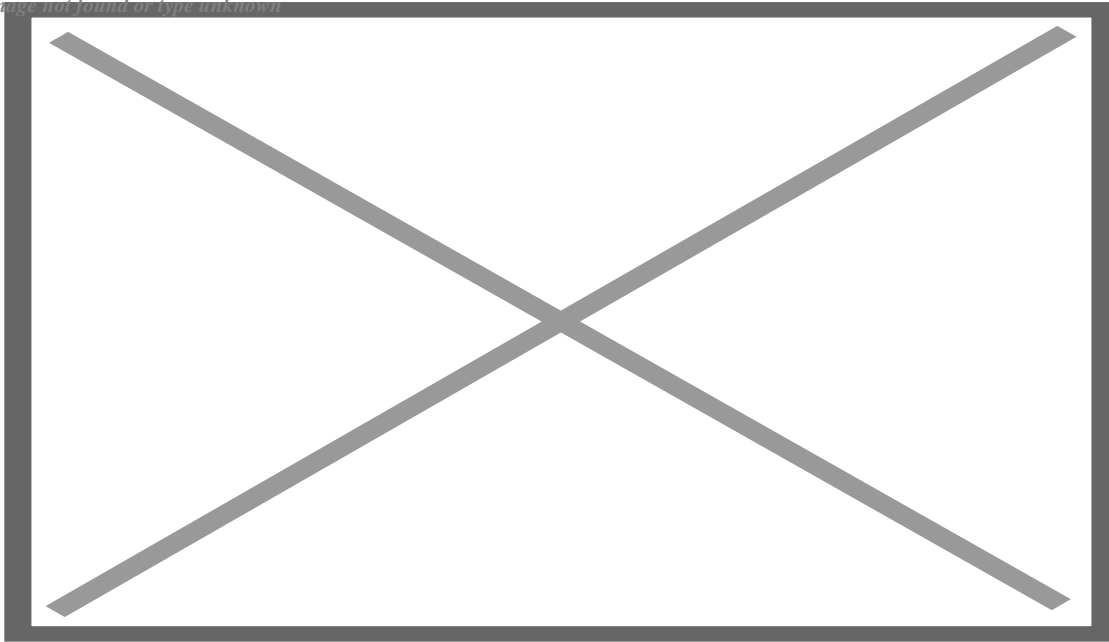

Cairo, November 16 (RHC)-- Last Friday evening, journalist Hind Khoudary was attending a crucial press conference at Al Shifa Hospital, Gaza's largest medical facility, when she found out her mobile phone had no internet coverage.
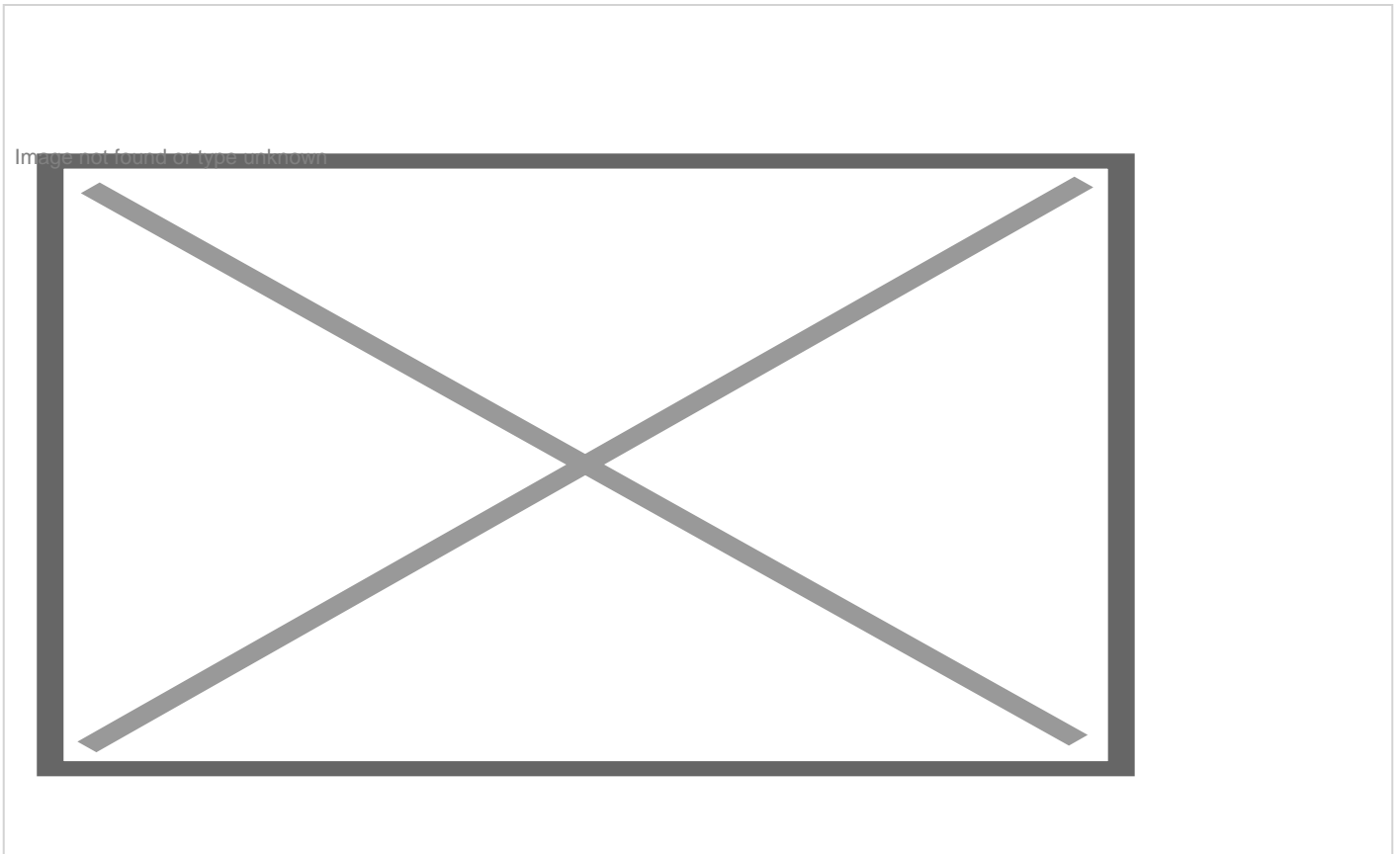
At first, she thought the connection issue had something to do with the hospital premises, especially since Israeli authorities had alleged just hours earlier that the sprawling medical complex was being used as a base by the Palestinian group Hamas.

However, it soon became clear that there was a complete communications blackout across Gaza – no phones and no internet, all while Israeli bombs rained down in the dark of night.

Khoudary, like millions of other Palestinians in the besieged enclave, was scared and fearing the worst as they were cut off completely from their loved ones. "I was terrified because I didn't know anything about my family. All I could hear were nonstop explosions, and we couldn't even know where that was happening," said Khoudary, who has been working with Anadolu since the latest flareup began over three weeks ago.

As the night wore on, Gaza echoed with the harrowing sound of constant explosions. Red flashes kept breaking through the dark sky, turning it an eerie orange and leaving the air thick with smoke.

The communications breakdown left over 2 million people isolated, without any contact with each other and the outside world.

Khoudary, an active user of X and Instagram with thousands of followers, had no way of telling the world what millions of Palestinians in Gaza were going through, something that she has been doing with immense courage and professionalism every single day.

Technology, though, provided a way out as Khoudary received an eSIM from her friend, Egyptian writer and activist Mirna El Helbawi. An eSIM card gives users the option to activate a mobile network's cellular data plan without actually having a physical SIM card.

Internet services were restored in Gaza almost 48 hours later but are still erratic and unreliable.

Khoudary said connections keep switching on and off, which is why she has been relying on her eSIM. "eSIMs have proven very important in connecting Palestinians with the world," she said.

Mirna and her sister Yara El Helbawi were among activists around the world who were searching for ways to help restore communications for Palestinians in Gaza. Like many others, they were also initially pushing for billionaire Elon Musk to provide his Starlink internet services in Gaza.

As those calls went unheeded and time ticked away, they started looking for other options. The Helbawi sisters then thought of roaming services. They started with two eSIMs bought from Europe and sent them to two people they knew in Gaza.

"Once we confirmed it's working, we started to call (to check) if some more people would like to get people connected through eSIMs," Yara told Anadolu in a video call.

In just 24 to 48 hours, the sisters received more than 2,000 eSIMs as donations, and they have so far been able to provide more than 1,000 to people in Gaza.

The initial priority was journalists and medical staff, but they are now giving them out to everyone. "This is completely an initiative done by people. It's from people to people and it kind of restored our faith in humanity," she said.

If Gaza is being deprived of even the most basic humanitarian needs, the least people can have there is a way or a tool to tell the world what is happening with them, said Yara.

"If what we're calling what's happened right now some sort of a genocide, like you want to exterminate a certain strip or a certain people or certain citizens, at least through telecommunication, uploading the stories, actually putting online what's happening, this at least gives us a way of documenting what's happened," she said.

"Thirty years from now, people would want to know what has been happening. This is a part of history that we're living right now and everyone has the right to document this. Without telecommunications we will not be able to do this."

Bashar Shaheen, a Jordanian marketing manager living Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh, is running a similar campaign to provide eSIMs to Palestinians. "I started with one guy in Gaza. I used to send him the eSIMs and he used to distribute them to his colleagues and journalists. And the circle got bigger," he told Anadolu in a video interview.

The first eSIM he received was donated by a teenage girl, which he sent to Gaza and landed in the hands of a journalist. Shaheen said they have received thousands of eSIMs in donations so far and are now working with four people to handle the distribution.

According to him, a major issue is that most of eSIMs only work on specialized or newer devices such as iPhone X and 11 or new Android phones. Also, not everyone knows how to activate eSIMs, he added.

He said they were initially receiving eSIMs with "weekly packages" but now people are sending more with monthly packages, "where each person gets 30GB valid for one month."

Both Helbawi and Shaheen asserted that they are not accepting cash donations. Shaheen said people who have received the eSIMs now "know that they have an option" even if the internet is cut off.

"Now they (Palestinians) know that they have people outside of Gaza who will do anything to help them. They will create the options. They will create the solutions for them to solve these problems," he said.

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