

Palestinian teenager -- Sha'ban al-Dalou -- burned to death in Israeli bombing

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Shaban al-Dalou was a software engineering student at Gaza's al-Azhar University [Courtesy of the al-Dalou family]

Gaza City, October 17 (RHC)-- He was only 19 years old. A software engineering student, and displaced from his home, trying to survive in central Gaza. He was a few days away from his 20th birthday.

Shaban al-Dalou wouldn't make it. He had struggled for months to get help for his family, recording videos describing his family's plight and their life under Israel's bombs. But he wasn't able to get enough money to get his family out of Gaza.

The world finally paid attention to Shaban when his last moments were filmed this week. Connected to an IV drip, he was burned alive along with his mother after Israeli forces bombed the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital complex in Deir el-Balah in the early hours of Monday.

In the videos Shaban recorded in the weeks and months before his death, he talks about the reality of living in Gaza, a premonition of the horror he faced at the end of his short life.

"There is no safe place here in Gaza," Shaban says in one video, speaking into a phone camera from the makeshift tent where he had been living since fleeing his home.

In another video, Shaban talks about the difficulties of finding food "because the Israeli occupation managed to separate the middle area from the rest of Gaza and the people here are struggling to [meet] their basic needs."

He also filmed himself donating blood at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, which Israel had already bombed several times in the last year before the bombing that killed him. "We saw so many injuries, many children are in dire need of blood," Shaban said. "All we demand is a ceasefire and for this tragedy to end."

In some videos, Shaban asked for donations to help his family evacuate to Egypt. "165 days of the continuous genocide against us," he said in one. "Five months we have lived in a tent."

"I'm taking care of my family, as I'm the oldest," he said in another, adding that his parents, two sisters and two brothers were displaced five times before finding refuge on the hospital's grounds. "The only thing between us and the freezing temperatures is this tent that we constructed by ourselves."

Tents used for shelter in the hospital effectively became coffins on Monday, when it was set ablaze by Israeli bombs, trapping Shaban and his relatives in the flames.

Shaban's father, Ahmad al-Dalou, who was severely burned, told Al Jazeera that the impact of the strike pushed him out of the tent, where he quickly realized that the fire had engulfed his children. He was able to save two of them.

"After that, the fire just engulfed everything. I couldn't rescue anyone," he said. "I did what I could."

Ahmad said Shaban had hoped to study abroad to become a doctor, but that he had wanted to keep his son closer to home. "Now, I wish I had sent him," he said.

Shaban was a studious boy who had memorised the entire Quran. Even during the war, he would often take out his laptop to study, his father added.

"He loved his mother the most," Ahmad said. "Now, he's been martyred in her arms. We buried them in each other's embrace."

The attack that killed Shaban and his relatives tore through a makeshift camp set up by displaced people in the hospital's courtyard, injuring at least 40. "I looked out and saw flames devouring the tents next to ours," Madi, a 37-year-old mother of six, told Al Jazeera from the charred remains of her tent. "My husband and I carried the kids and ran towards the emergency building."

“People – women, men and children – were running away from the spreading fire, screaming,” she added. “Some of them were still burning, their bodies on fire as they ran.”

Like the al-Dalou family, many of those seeking refuge by the hospital have been displaced many times. “Where are we supposed to go?” said Madi. “It’s nearly winter. Is there no one to stop this holocaust against us?”

The hospital bombing came as Israel continues to escalate its attacks on Gaza. Just days earlier, another strike on a school turned shelter, in Jabalia, killed at least 28 people. Horrific images of the fire at Al-Aqsa Hospital that killed Shaban earned a rare rebuke from U.S. officials.

“The images and video of what appear to be displaced civilians burning alive following an Israeli air strike are deeply disturbing and we have made our concerns clear to the Israeli government,” a spokesperson for the Biden administration said in a statement on Monday. “Israel has a responsibility to do more to avoid civilian casualties — and what happened here is horrifying, even if Hamas was operating near the hospital in an attempt to use civilians as human shields.”

Israel has regularly made that accusation with little evidence.

The end result of the Israeli bombing was the fire that devastated the al-Dalou family. “We are people that only ask for peace and freedom,” Ahmad told Al Jazeera, mourning his son and wife. “We want basic rights, nothing else. May God take care of our oppressors.”

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