

Gaza family killed just minutes before ceasefire goes into effect

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'My children, my children': The Gaza family killed minutes before ceasefire

The al-Qidra family wanted to go back home. They didn't know that the Israel-Hamas ceasefire had been delayed. Hanan al-Qidra's husband Ahmed was killed in an Israeli attack in Khan Younis just before the Israel-Hamas ceasefire came into effect [Abdelhakim Abu Riash/Al Jazeera]

Khan Younis, January 20 (RHC)-- The ceasefire in Gaza was supposed to start at 8.30am (06:30 GMT). The al-Qidra family had endured 15 months of Israeli attacks. They had been displaced more than once and were living in a tent. Their relatives had been among the more than 46,900 Palestinians killed by Israel.

But the al-Qidras had survived. And they wanted to go home.

Ahmed al-Qidra packed his seven children onto a donkey cart and headed to eastern Khan Younis. It was finally safe to travel – the bombing should have stopped.

But the family did not know that the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas had been delayed. They did not know that, even in those additional few hours, Israeli aircraft were still flying over the skies of Gaza, ready to drop their bombs.

The explosion was loud. Ahmed's wife Hanan heard it. She had stayed behind at a relative's home in the centre of the city, organising their belongings, planning on joining her husband and children a few hours later.

"The blast felt like it hit my heart," Hanan said. She instinctively knew that something had happened to her children, whom she had only just said goodbye to.

"My children, my children!" she screamed.

The cart had been hit. Hanan's eldest son, 16-year-old Adly, was dead. So was her youngest, six-year-old Sama, the baby of the family. Yasmin, 12, explained that a four-wheel drive was in front of the cart carrying people celebrating the ceasefire. Perhaps that was the reason the missile hit.

"I saw Sama and Adly lying on the ground, and my father bleeding and unconscious on the cart," Yasmin said. She pulled her eight-year-old sister Aseel out before a second missile hit the spot where they had been. Eleven-year-old Mohammed also survived.

But Ahmed, Hanan's partner in life, was pronounced dead in the hospital.

'My children were my world'

Sitting on the edge of her injured daughter Iman's hospital bed in Khan Younis's Nasser Hospital, Hanan was still shell-shocked. "Where was the ceasefire?" she asked. In their excitement to finally return to whatever was left of their home, the family had missed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declaring that the Palestinian group Hamas had not sent over the names of the three Israeli captives who would be released on Sunday as part of the ceasefire deal.

They had not seen Hamas explain that there were technical reasons for the delay, and that the names would be provided, as they eventually were.

They would not know that in the three-hour delay before the ceasefire eventually began, three members of their family would be killed. They were among the 19 Palestinians killed by Israel in those last few hours, according to Gaza's Civil Defence.

Hanan broke down in tears. She would now have to face life without her husband and without two of her children. The loss of Sama, "the last of the bunch" as she described her with the Arabic saying, was particularly hard.

"Sama was my youngest and the most spoiled. She'd get angry whenever I talked about having another child." Adly had been her "pillar of support". Her children were her world.

“We endured this entire war, facing the harshest conditions of displacement and bombardment,” Hanan said. “My children dealt with hunger, a lack of food and basic necessities.”

“We survived more than a year of this war, only for them to be killed in its last minutes. How can this happen?”

A day of joy had been turned into a nightmare. The family had celebrated the end of the war the night before.

“Hasn’t the Israeli army had enough of our blood and the atrocities they committed for 15 months?” Hanan asked.

Then, she thought of her future. With her husband and two of her children ripped away from her, and with tears coming down her face, she asked: “What’s left?”

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