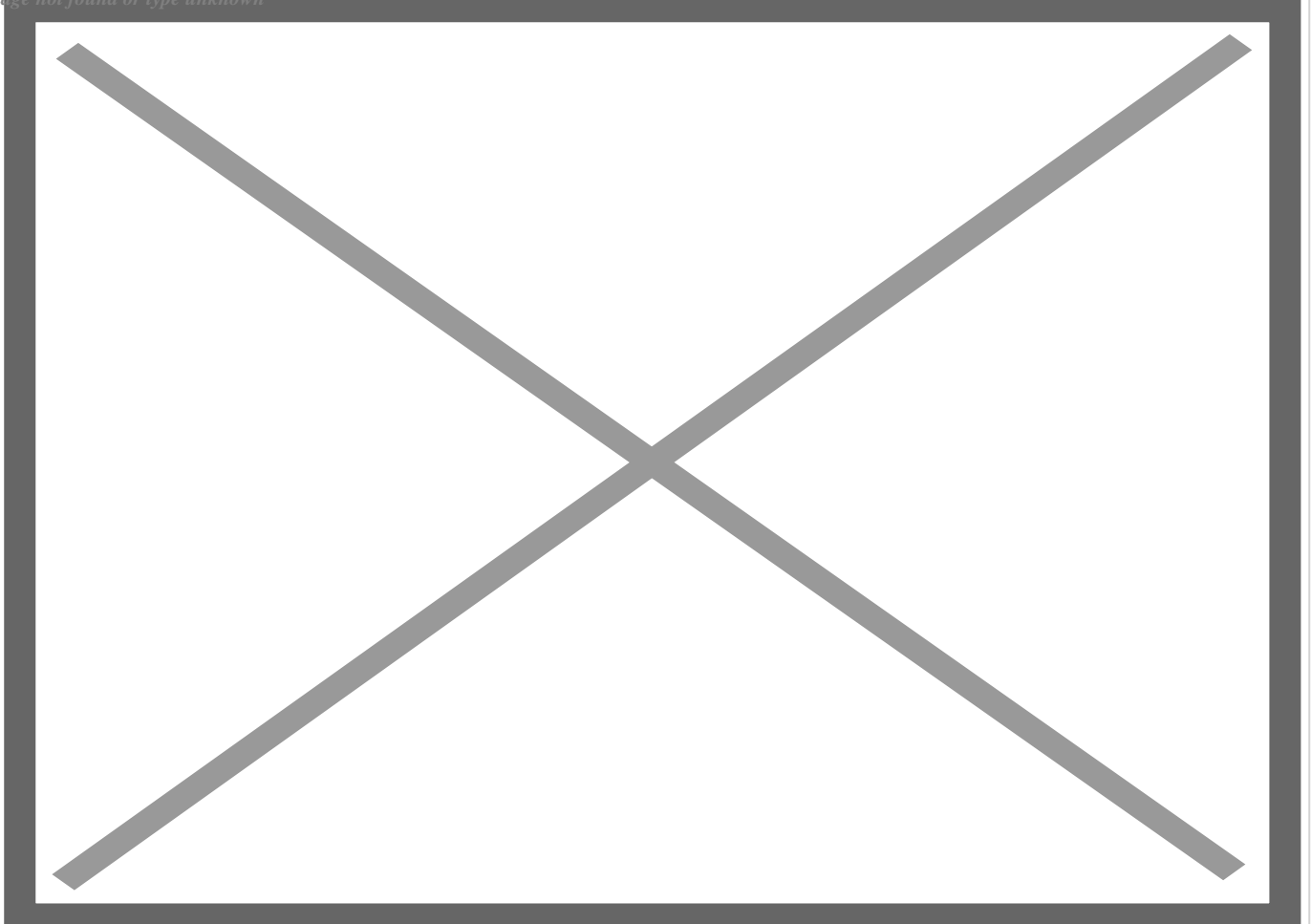


# *Exhausted Palestinians arrive in Gaza City to find destruction and death*

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Gaza City, January 29 (RHC)-- There are many stories among the tens of thousands of people walking along Gaza's al-Rashid Street, heading for the north.

Among the crowd is a man with a white beard walking with determination alongside his family. In one hand, he carries a blanket and a few meagre possessions. In the other, he holds onto his adult son, who

has Down Syndrome.

Rifaat Jouha doesn't pretend that he isn't tired. He started his journey in the morning in southern Gaza, in Khan Younis's al-Mawasi, where his family had been displaced for 15 months during Israel's war on Gaza.

The aim was to reach Gaza City, a journey finally possible since Israel allowed Palestinians in the southern Gaza Strip to travel north on Monday, after a ceasefire began on January 19th.

But it's a long walk – some 30 kilometres (18.6 miles) along a coastal road – and Rifaat's family were forced to stop to rest every hour. "The journey has been exhausting and very difficult," Rifaat tells Al Jazeera, after finally reaching Gaza City. "Despite that, we were determined to return."

Rifaat is not sure of his plan now that he has returned home. His physical home, in northern Gaza City, no longer exists – he explains that it was destroyed in an Israeli attack in October.

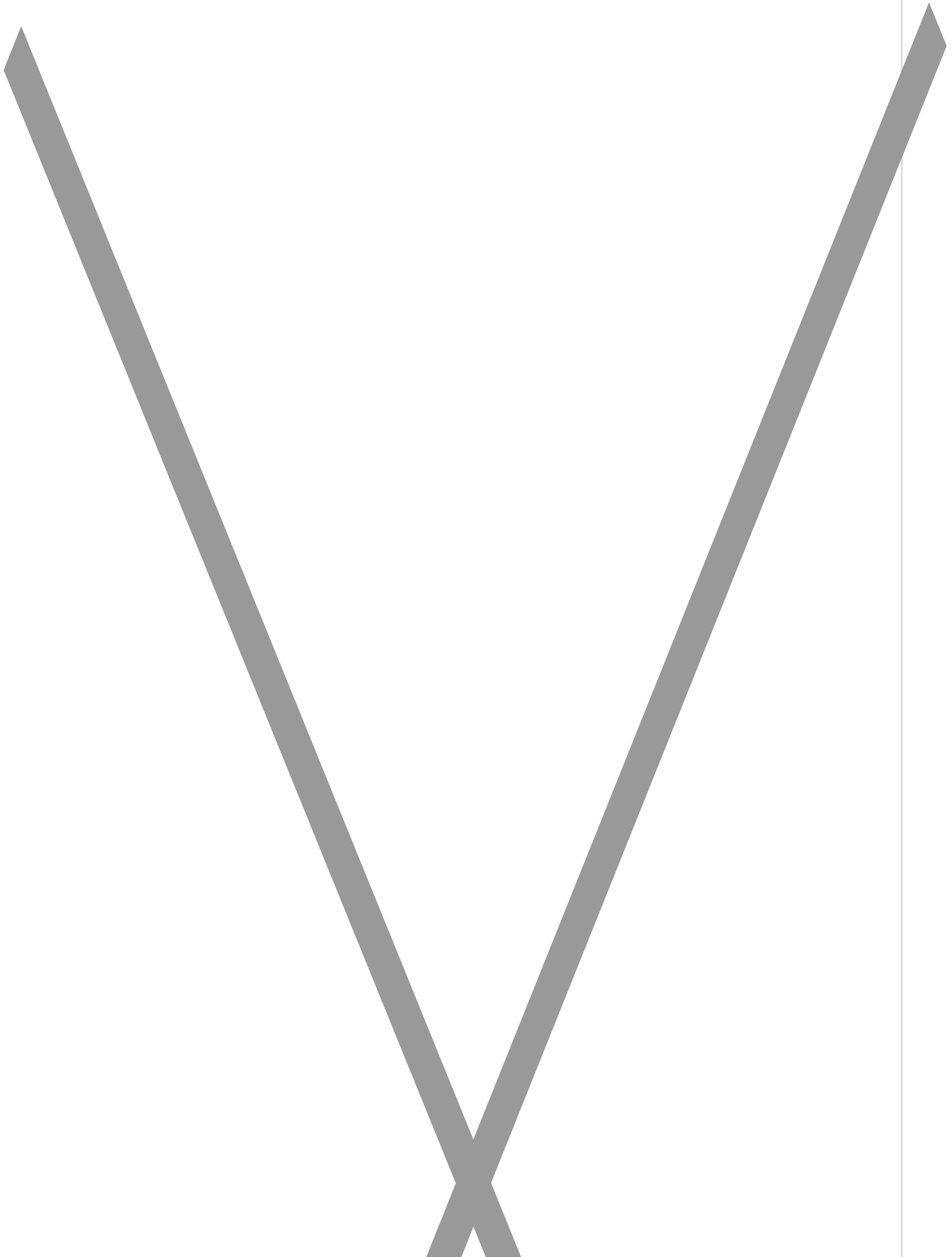
"They [Rifaat's contacts in Gaza City] say the situation is very difficult, with no water, no services, and widespread destruction," Rifaat says. "But what difference does it make? We are moving from a difficult situation to an even harder one. We will rebuild what we can. But [making the journey to return] back has lifted our spirits and renewed our hope."

Before the war began 15 months ago, the majority of Gaza's population lived in the north, centred around the enclave's biggest urban area, Gaza City. But that is also where Israel has focused its attacks, and issued forced evacuation orders early on in the war, telling people to flee to "safe zones" in central and southern Gaza.

That led to the majority of Gaza's approximately 2.3 million population displaced in those central and southern areas, below a corridor carved out of central Gaza that Israel called Netzarim.

While the destruction was overwhelming in the north – approximately 74 percent of Gaza City's buildings have been damaged or destroyed in the war – the supposed safe zones were not spared, and the areas people had fled to were also devastated – 50 percent of buildings in central Gaza's Deir el-Balah were damaged or destroyed, while in southern Gaza, it was 55 percent of buildings in Khan Younis and 48 percent of buildings in Rafah.

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The constant Israeli attacks – which killed at least 47,300 throughout the war – forced Palestinians to flee from place to place and made many feel that they should never have left Gaza City and the north in the first place. “The days of displacement were the hardest and most exhausting,” Rifaat says. “We cannot imagine continuing our lives as displaced people away from our homes.”

“Anyone who sees these crowds understands well that no plans for forced displacement will succeed, no matter what happens,” he adds, before suggesting that he may even be able to return to Ashdod – a city just north of Gaza but now in Israel – from which his family were forcibly displaced in 1948 during what Palestinians call the Nakba, or “catastrophe”, with the creation of Israel.

Displacement is a central motif for Palestinians – owing to the 1948 Nakba when at least 750,000 Palestinians were forced from their homes. Many people in Gaza itself are refugees, their families originally from towns and villages now part of Israel. And so, particularly after the experience during the current Gaza war, many regret ever having left their homes in the north.

Sami al-Dabbagh, a 39-year-old heading back to Sheikh Radwan in northern Gaza, explains that he was displaced to several different areas before settling in central Gaza. The father-of-four, having walked on foot for hours, says he will never make the same mistake again.

“We will never repeat the experience of displacement, no matter what happens,” al-Dabbagh says. It’s a sentiment shared by another man travelling up to northern Gaza, Radwan al-Ajoul. “Displacement has taught us never to leave our homes again,” he says, as he carries his belongings on his shoulder.

The 45-year-old father of eight has been living in Deir el-Balah, but like al-Dabbagh, he is also from Sheikh Radwan.

“The feeling of returning is indescribable, especially since the conditions are no different between the north and the south,” he says.

Conversations on al-Rashid Street are fleeting – the people walking here have been moving for hours, trying to keep track of their family members, helping those weaker than them, and carrying the few belongings they have been able to keep a hold of after more than a year of war and displacement. But the details shared reveal the loss that Palestinians in Gaza have had to endure.

Khaled Ibrahim, 52, came from Khan Younis and is headed to Beit Lahiya, north of Gaza City. His family – he has four children – have no home to return to. He plans to set up a tent instead.

But more than a home, he has lost those closest to him; Ibrahim’s wife, granddaughter, and two of his brothers were killed in a bombing near their tent in Khan Younis last June. “Our lives are hard. We have lost everything in every way,” Ibrahim says.

Another returnee, Nada Jahjouh, has also lost family. One of her sons was killed during Gaza’s Great March of Return – in 2018, before the war. Another was killed in May during an Israeli attack. She now has one son and a grandson left – whom she carries as she walks.

“We are exhausted, physically and mentally,” Jahjouh says. “I feel very sad returning without my sons. My joy is incomplete.”



**Radio Habana Cuba**