

Kuwait Times

THE LEADING INDEPENDENT
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF
ESTABLISHED 1961

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Focus

GAZA, PALESTINIAN
TERRITORY RAVAGED
BY WARS, POVERTY

The Gaza Strip, run by Islamist movement Hamas for the past 10 years, is a poverty-stricken and overcrowded Palestinian coastal enclave. It is facing a strict Israeli blockade, while its border with Egypt has also been largely closed in recent years. Hamas is considered a terrorist group by Israel, the United States and the European Union.

Cramped enclave

Situated on the Mediterranean coast, between Israel and Egypt, the Gaza Strip is home to around two million Palestinians. They live in a cramped area of just 362 square kilometers, making it one of the most densely populated territories on the planet. After the Arab-Israeli war of 1948-1949 and the formation of the Jewish state of Israel, Gaza came under Egyptian administration, but was never annexed. Israel seized the territory from Egypt during the June 1967 Six-Day War.

Shut-in

On September 12, 2005, Israel pulled out all of its soldiers and settlers from Gaza in a unilateral move which ended 38 years of occupation. In the summer of 2006, following the capture of a soldier by militants from Hamas, Israel imposed a blockade on Gaza which was tightened a year later after the Islamists forcibly ousted troops loyal to Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah faction. Since the ousting of Egypt's Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013, the only entrance to Gaza not controlled by Israel, Rafah, has been almost completely closed by Cairo.

45 percent unemployment

According to the World Bank, Gaza's GDP losses caused by the blockade are estimated at more than 50 percent. The Gaza Strip has almost no industry, and it suffers from a chronic lack of water and fuel. Unemployment stands at 45 percent and more than two thirds of the population depends on humanitarian aid.

String of Israeli operations

On February 27-March 3, 2008, Israel carried out operation "Hot Winter" following the death of an Israeli from rocket fire from Gaza. More than 120 Palestinians were killed. Unrest continued-Gaza rocket fire and Israeli attacks-in which hundreds of Palestinians were killed until a truce was concluded in June. On December 27, Israel launched a vast air offensive-"Operation Cast Lead"-in a bid to put an end to Palestinian rocket fire. On January 18, 2009 a ceasefire came into force to end the Israeli operation, in which 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis were killed. Beginning November 14, 2012, Israel's "Operation Pillar of Defence" was launched with a missile strike that kills top Hamas commander Ahmed Jaabari. In the ensuing eight-day flare-up, 177 Palestinians and six Israelis were killed before an Egypt-brokered truce takes effect. On July 8, 2014, Israel launched "Operation Protective Edge" against Gaza with the aim of ending rocket fire and destroying smuggling and militant tunnels dug from the enclave. The war left 2,251 dead on the Palestinian side and 74 on the Israeli side.

Islamic Jihad

The radical Palestinian movement Islamic Jihad is the enclave's second biggest force after Hamas. Founded early in the 1980s in the wake of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, a close ally and ideological inspiration, it is devoted to armed action. In May, Islamic Jihad rejected Hamas's new policy of somewhat easing its stand on Israel and accepting the establishment of a Palestinian state limited to the 1967 borders.—AFP



GAZA: A Palestinian family eats dinner by candlelight at their makeshift home in the Rafah refugee camp, in the southern Gaza Strip, during a power outage. — AFP

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FRIEND OR FOE? TAIWAN'S DISAPPEARING ALLIES

Panama walking out on its relationship with Taiwan to establish ties with rival China is the latest in a spate of diplomatic dumping that is leaving Taipei increasingly isolated. Beijing still sees self-ruling Taiwan as part of its territory to be reunified, while the democratic island views itself as a sovereign country, although it has never formally declared independence. The governments in Taipei and Beijing insist that countries can only recognize one of them as legitimate and for years they have kept a tally of their supporters.

Most states have sided with Beijing, and the numbers doing so have swelled as China's global financial and political clout has grown. But a dwindling band of nations still formally recognize Taiwan—mainly developing countries in Africa, Latin America, the Pacific and the Caribbean. The diplomatic tug-of-war enjoyed a hiatus between 2008 and 2016, when Taiwan's then-president Ma Ying-jeou called off the competition and nurtured closer ties with the mainland. But since China-sceptic leader Tsai Ing-wen came to power last year, cross-strait relations have worsened dramatically and erstwhile friends have started to jump ship. Only 20 states, including the Vatican, now officially recognize Taiwan, with predictions that number will shrink further.

Recent departures

In December 2016 the small African nation of Sao Tome and Principe severed ties with Taiwan, acknowledging China's "increasingly important" international role, as Beijing pumped billions of dollars into the continent. In March that year, China announced it was to resume ties with Gambia, after the West African country broke off relations with Taiwan in 2013 citing "strategic national interest".

Prior to that, Malawi had been the last ally to jump ship, in 2008, one of nine that switched under former Taiwan president Chen Shui-bian. After Chen took the helm in 2000, cross-strait relations hit rock bottom because of his promotion of the island's independence. The other allies lost during his eight-year term were Macedonia, Liberia, Dominica, Vanuatu, Grenada, Senegal, Chad and Costa Rica. Chen established new ties with three small countries—Kiribati, Nauru and St Lucia—bringing the total number of formal friends to 23 by the time Ma took office in 2008.

Forever friends?

Taiwan now has just two allies in Africa—Burkina Faso and Swaziland. In central and south America, Taiwan counts Belize, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay as official allies. Chen's ties with Kiribati, Nauru and St Lucia still stand,

along with the Marshall Islands, Palau, the Solomon Islands and Tuvalu in the Pacific. The Caribbean nations of St Kitts and Nevis and St Vincent also still have formal ties.

Partnerships in question

The Vatican is widely seen as Taiwan's most powerful remaining ally—its only one in Europe—but there have been signs Beijing is working towards resuming relations with the Holy See. Although there are an estimated 12 million Catholics in China, there have been no diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Beijing since 1951. China is suspicious of religion and the "official" Catholic Church is run by the government-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association—but there is also an "underground" Church which swears allegiance only to the pope.

State-sanctioned bishops in China are chosen by the association, while the Vatican insists on its right to appoint all the Catholic Church's bishops. However, the head of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong said last year the Chinese government was willing to reach an "understanding" with the Vatican over the issue, although it is expected to be a lengthy process. According to Taiwan's local media and some of the island's lawmakers, other allies rumored to be considering switching ties are El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Paraguay. — AFP

TIRED, TRAUMATIZED IRAQI MOTHERS UNABLE TO BREASTFEED

By Layal Abou Rahal

Wazira rocks her tiny baby pleadingly but he is inconsolable, crying for the milk his mother can neither produce herself nor buy in a camp near the Iraqi battleground city of Mosul. "He's been crying since the moment he was born. He only stops when he's so exhausted that he falls asleep," the 24-year-old Iraqi mother said, sheltering her baby Rakan from the scorching sun with a piece of white cloth. "I cannot breastfeed him and I feel he's never satisfied. There's no good food to eat and no money to buy baby formula," she said, sitting outside one of the clinics in Khazir camp.

The camp southeast of Mosul, where Iraqi forces are deep into the eighth month of a massive operation against the Islamic State jihadist group, is crammed with around 32,000 people displaced from the war-torn city. Conditions in Khazir, one of the largest-but not the worst-displacement camps around Mosul are difficult. Temperatures soaring past the 110-Fahrenheit mark add to Rakan's discomfort. "Sometimes I pound the biscuits they give us at the camp into powder and mix them with water to try to feed him by force," said the young mother, her face partly covered by a black veil.

A few yards down the queue, Marwa is also waiting for her turn to take her eight-month-old daughter to a doctor. The 25-year-old mother, who fled west Mosul with her family two weeks earlier, already had no maternal milk to give Maryam five months ago. "These past few months made me very tired, we kept moving from house to house until we finally managed to get out," she said. "I was sick and couldn't feed her anymore."

As elite forces retake the city one neighborhood at a time, civilians often used as human shields by the jihadists stay cooped up in their homes—at risk from shelling and dwindling food supplies—until their area is retaken. The line of haggard-looking mothers holding their wailing babies curled around the clinic run by the International Medical Corps, a US-based charity.

Stress

Neshmeel Diller, one of the doctors at the clinic, said she examined up to 80 women in a single day. "Seventy percent of them complain of their inability to breastfeed and of their children always being

hungry and crying all the time," she said. "The psychological condition of these mothers and the hormonal changes caused by anxiety and depression, the lack of privacy and physical comfort as well as of balanced nutrition... all these factors converge to affect their ability to breastfeed," Diller said.

She added that the pressure of life in the camp often meant that mothers would lose the patience to repeat their attempts. Doctors Without Borders (MSF), another medical charity, said it was also monitor-

ing the impact of high lactation failure rates on nutrition among the displaced child population. More than 800,000 people have been forced from their homes since the start of the Mosul operation last October. Most experienced traumatizing living conditions under the ruthless rule of IS for close to three years, risked their lives trying to flee and now face a very uncertain future.

"Stress is a major factor affecting the mothers of our little patients. Stress affects breastfeeding more than a mother's own

nutritional status or physical health," MSF's medical coordinator in Iraq, Evgenia Zelikova said. "We do notice an increase in malnutrition among babies whose mothers are no longer able to breastfeed," she said. "This is because formula milk is often hard to come by or extremely expensive in besieged areas of Mosul and in the camps." The UN Children's Fund said it had noticed a spike in malnutrition among the most recently displaced children and had begun distributing a peanut-based supplement among affected populations. — AFP



HASAN SHAM, Iraq: An Iraqi woman carries a child at the Hasan Sham camp for internally displaced people. Tired and traumatized, Iraqi mothers who fled Mosul struggle to breastfeed or buy baby formula milk for their babies. — AFP