



MSF Diary (experience from the field) September 2009

I was a century too late.
The holy land. The beautiful land. The land of plenty. So much has been said about Palestine. I am reminded of a poem by Fadwa Tuqan

*Enough for me to die on her earth, Be buried in her
To melt and vanish in her soil, Then sprout forth as a flower
Played with by a child from my country
Enough for me to remain, In my country's embrace
To be in her close as a handful of dust
A sprig of grass, A flower*

I always wanted to visit the holy land for a simple reason. I wanted to see what made this piece of the earth so special that it was revered by the three important religions of the world. The opportunity came when I was offered a mission to Gaza. I looked forward to this journey in spite of the security hazard.
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The flight to Tel Aviv and the journey to Jerusalem were uneventful. We shared an Indian meal in the evening at the MSF house. I ran into some old friends from previous missions and was commissioned to the kitchen immediately. We were to travel the next day to Gaza. The medical co-coordinator and some other team members were traveling with me. I was briefed about the rigid security constraints and was mentally prepared for the ordeal. Things went smoothly, even at the check point, except for the long delay in transit. We reached Gaza city by evening and went to the office. The surprise was the "hospital in a tent". It was a surprise how a temporary hospital in tents could be so well equipped and managed.

I had to hold myself back and spent the night in the flat nearby. The next day, after a formal welcome, we started the surgical work. I was told before I left for the mission that there was a waiting list of nearly 126 patients requiring surgery. I could spare only two weeks but had resolved firmly to finish this list before I came back. I enjoyed working in this friendly atmosphere. The national staffs were competent and friendly.

The mission was well established. I was reminded of another poem, this one "Brokers" by Ibrahim Tuqan

*My country's brokers are a shameless band, Who shamelessly
survive
Even Satan went bankrupt, When he realized their temptation
They lead an easy and splendid life
But the bliss is the prize of the country's misery
They pretend to be its saviors,
Whatever you say, they claim to be its leaders, And protectors!
But they are its ruin
It is bought and sold through their hands.....*

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The evenings were a bit boring as we had to finish the OT by 16.00 hrs for the staff to prepare for the next day. Mobility was restricted and the only opportunity I had was when we were invited for an evening by the ICRC workers. Their place had a splendid view of the Mediterranean Sea and we could see the fishing boats leaving for their work. They would return with loads of manna by the early light! We had volunteers from other NGO's joining us and it was a feast fit for a king.

The interaction with the locals was limited mainly to the national staff and the patients. I found them a proud and affectionate race who would give the shirt off their back for a friend.

The quotes I have given in this passage are quite natural to this region as poetry and music are considered divine. When there appeared a poet in a family of the Arabs, the other tribes around would gather together to wish them joy for their good luck. The coming to light of a poet was considered as auspicious as the birth of a male child or the foaling of a noble mare!!!

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Gaza and west bank are a prison. Walled in for security constraints, even the fishermen cannot venture into the sea further than permitted. If you peruse the history of this part of the world, the collapse of the Ottomann empire left a big void. The British mandate of 1940 and the Arab resurgence are history. Jordan lost its west bank territory of 1948 in the 1967 war. After this massive drubbing the Palestinians were almost abandoned by all their Arab brothers to fend for themselves. The Egyptians negotiated a peace settlement. They received back territories annexed in the 1967 war and Israel received the much needed recognition as a state. The land has been in turmoil for many many years. Some attempt at local government looks to soften the problems to some extent. A long term solution, though, remains a distant dream.

Due to the security constraints we were unable to move about. Even movement inside Gaza city was limited to MSF cars. I can imagine what the inhabitants of this region feel being boxed in a world like Alice.

The return from the check point was more of an adventure. We passed many chambers and doors. The entire baggage was spread out and even we were stripped. The silver lining was that tomorrow was another day and I would visit the holy city.

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I took a local bus to the old city but unfortunately it was Friday and the dome of the rock was off limits. With my looks, I pass for a Muslim and was able to recite to the satisfaction of the guards. I visited the dome and some more sites but could not see the wall.

Some things are better left undone and I look forward to another mission so that I may be able to see this holy structure. I was a century too late.

Ar Ramleh is the capital of Palestine (Palestinian territories). It was a fine city, well built with plenty of good water, abundant fruits. It sat in the midst of beautiful villages, lordly towns, near to holy places and pleasant hamlets. There was no finer mosque in Islam than in this city.

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