

The Arab Refugee Plight in Gaza Area

Letter from Harold Hindle James,
published in the Egyptian Gazette, March 1952

Summary and scanned image
prepared by John Barnard, March 2013

This letter, dated 16 Mar 1952, was published in The Egyptian Gazette. A marginal note in hand of James's aunt Ethel James says "received 27.3.1952", and the cutting was presumably sent to her by James.

The letter describes his visit to Gaza refugee camps in Feb 1952, not long after the "Cairo Fires" riots of 26 January 1952, in which James had narrowly avoided being killed in the attack on the Cairo Turf Club. The purpose of his visit was to discuss arrangements for distribution of blankets, clothing etc., which had been collected by All Saints Cathedral in Cairo. He compares the situation with that which he saw on a previous visit a year earlier, and notes the destruction of tents, hutments etc., which had occurred during winter storms. Though he describes with approval the work being carried out by hospitals and schools, he expresses concern about the increasing hopelessness of the elderly, and the resentment and restlessness developing in the young, especially following the recent violence in Egypt. He concludes by suggesting that unless the relevant authorities can formulate a plan to provide some hope for the refugees, only subversive elements can prosper.

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exist. This danger does not grow less as time passed from year to year without any solution, or even any enheartening sign to give these people, destitute, homeless, workless, some cause for hope, and some objective towards which they can aspire.

Surely a practical decision, powerfully implemented can now be devised amongst the authorities of the United Nations, and the Arab and Israeli leaders, to prevent, even at this late moment, some further disaster which may have repercussions throughout the world, and can only do great harm to all concerned, from which only subversive elements can profit.

Yours, etc.,

H. Hindle James,

Cairo, March 16.

Received 27.3.52

Sir, — Having recently returned from a visit to the Gaza area of Palestine, I would like briefly to record the following aspects of the present situation there.

It was almost exactly one year since the last of my visits to this area (which I had first known at the time of the Battles of Gaza in the 1914-18 war) upon work for Aid to the Arab Refugees, some 200,000 persons, who had fled there from Israeli aggression in 1948.

In addition there are the Gaza townspeople about 65,000 in number, themselves also rendered destitute from the same cause, although not technically considered to be "refugees" and so not entitled to United Nations Assistance, which makes their condition the more desperate.

Last year, as the outcome of an individual "drive" organised from All Saint's Cathedral in Cairo, clothing and blankets were distributed to about 7,000 persons in the Gaza area.

This year another similar drive was attempted in Cairo, but this time on a wider scale, and with the support of many various communities Egyptian and foreign. This drive had the approval of the Arab Superior Council, and H.R.H. Princess Fawzia graciously gave her personal patronage and support.

Unfortunately abnormal conditions in Egypt during recent months made it impossible to launch all of the work for publicity which had been prepared. Nevertheless the Executive committee, of Egyptian and foreign membership, continued in being, and was able through continuing in cordial co-operation to achieve very considerable results, though of course short of what had originally been our objective.

I was invited to proceed by U.N. aircraft to Gaza on February 15 last, to discuss with the United Nations Organisation at Gaza the methods for distribution of the clothing, blankets and cloth, which our combined drive in Cairo had produced. This was satisfactorily arranged, and the actual distribution, after agreement with the Egyptian Military Governor, was undertaken by the United Nations authorities through the practical methods which had been worked out by them for local needs.

A percentage of the supplies was allotted to the Gaza residents, and a small part for emergency needs of the Camp Welfare scheme. On my departure from Cairo for Gaza a cheque for L.E. 100 was handed to me from the British Embassy to add to the funds of our Appeal. This generous donation has been passed through our Committee, and with certain other donations recently received, will be used for further Refugee Aid.

It was a matter of tragic impressiveness to find oneself again, after the passing of another full year, amongst these

homeless people, their future seemingly as undecided as ever. For most, this has been their fourth winter since being driven from their homes.

I know that special warning was given to senior authorities early last year by U.N. administrators, at Gaza that tents, hutments, and clothing were all in outworn condition and inadequate for any emergency which might arise during winter. Statements publicly issued by various associations, in particular by the World Council of Churches after their conference at Beirut, by the International Red Cross Society, and by "The Times" newspaper in London, have all during the past year again stressed the desperate condition of these Arab Refugees and the grave implications of this situation.

I, myself, in the Arabic and English local press, and elsewhere, have at various times from the point of view of personal informal observation and contacts, pressed, as far as is individually possible, the urgency of the situation and its local repercussions in Egypt and the Middle East generally.

Since then the winter months have passed, and during these months a very grave emergency did in fact arise. Violent storms of bitterly cold wind and weeks of torrential rain brought the misery of these thousands of people, crowded helplessly in the narrow Gaza strip, to a climax of suffering greater than any thing which had been experienced before.

Tents and hutments were entirely destroyed, and in spite of every effort by the local U.N. Organisation, shelter and supplies were quite inadequate to meet the emergency. Since then great efforts have been made to repair the damage, and great credit is due to the local U.N. Organisers, and to the Egyptian authorities who, I understand, co-operated with all energy.

I visited, during this recent tour, many refugee camps, and was taken again to see schools and hospitals. The T.B. hospital has been much enlarged and is a very fine achievement, of the greatest benefit. It was disturbing however to observe bull marks both inside and outside the hospital premises which the building had received in the course of a recent frontier skirmish. The C.M.S. hospital in Gaza town still carries on ceaseless work, of great devotion and efficiency.

In the schools, I was greatly impressed by the continued keenness of both teachers and pupils. In view of the increased hardship endured so recently by all categories of these refugees, this is a moving and significant fact.

Nevertheless, all is evidently not well in these Refugee camps. The old or elderly are becoming perhaps only increasingly apathetic and hopeless, but amongst the young people there is definite resentment and a desperate restlessness. This was made clear to me especially in talks with young men of college age, and some of the young school masters and "intelligencia."

Recent grave events in Cairo have not passed unnoticed, nor are there lacking in the Gaza area those agitators who try to make attractive an appeal to violence. Very serious possibilities