

World

'I'm still in shock'

The loving children killed when collecting water for their family

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Jerusalem

In Gaza, being a helpful, loving child can be a death sentence. Heba al-Ghussain's nine-year-old son, Karam, was killed by an Israeli airstrike because he went to fetch water for the family, and her 10-year-old daughter, Lulu, was killed because she went to give Karam a hand.

The siblings were waiting beside a water distribution station, holding jerry cans and buckets, when it was bombed last Sunday, killing six children and four adults and injuring 19 others, mostly children.

Lulu and Karam died instantly, torn apart by the force of the blast and so disfigured that their father prevented Heba from seeing their bodies.

"They didn't allow me to say goodbye or even look at them one last time," she said. "One of my brothers hugged me, trying to block the scene from me as he cried and tried to comfort me. After that, I don't remember anything. I lost touch with reality."

Lulu's real name was Lana but her parents rarely used it because her nickname, which means pearl, captured the gentle shine she brought to family life. "She had such a joyful personality, and a heart full of kindness," Heba said.

Karam was clever, always top of his class until Israeli attacks shut down Gaza's schools, generous and mature beyond his years. His father, Ashraf al-Ghussain, called him "abu sharik" or "my partner", because he seemed "like a man in spirit".

But he was also enough of a child to be obsessed by a remote-controlled car, which he begged his mother to buy. She regrets telling him they needed to save money for food. "I wish I had spent everything I had to buy it for him so he could have played with it before he died."

Both children also dreamt of the day Israel would lift its blockade of Gaza, so they could taste chocolate, instant noodles and their mother's best dishes. For Lulu that was



the Palestinian chicken dish musakhan, for Karam shawarma. "They had all kinds of food plans for me to prepare," Heba said.

Israel imposed a total siege for 11 weeks starting in March that has brought Gaza to the brink of famine, and the very limited food, fuel and medical supplies allowed in since May have not relieved extreme hunger.

Unprecedented malnutrition is killing children, and preventing injured people recovering, a British doctor working there said this week.

Trying to get food has been a deadly gamble for months, with more than 800 people killed since late May in near daily attacks by Israeli soldiers using weapons including tank shells and navy cannons to target desperate crowds near food distribution points.

Trying to get clean water is also a struggle. Nearly two years of Israeli attacks have destroyed water treatment plants and pipe networks. Last month, Unicef warned that Gaza faces a man-made drought and, without fuel to operate remaining stations, children could start dying of thirst.

But until Sunday, there had not been any mass killings of people trying to collect water. The al-Ghussains sent their children to collect supplies for the family because they thought it was less dangerous than searching for food.

Aid groups brought water in trucks to fill tanks at a water distribution station just a few streets away from the school where the family sought shelter after their home was bombed. Karam would wait there in the sweltering heat for his turn at taps that often ran dry.

▲ Karam and Lulu were killed collecting water. A child injured in the same Israeli strike in hospital, right, and mourning the dead, below

PHOTOGRAPHS:
 EYAD BABA; OMAR
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"I had no choice but to send them," Heba said. "Many times, my son would go and wait for his turn, sometimes for an hour, only to end up with nothing because the water would run out before it reached everyone."

When he did get water, it was only 20 litres, very little for a family of seven but a heavy weight for a young boy. "Karam was only nine years old and braver than dozens of men. He carried it without tiring or complaining."

'They didn't allow me to say goodbye or look at their bodies. I don't remember anything after. I lost touch with reality'

Heba al-Ghussain
Mother

The long queues meant that Heba was not too worried when she heard the water station was hit. Her son left home not long before the bombing, so she assumed he would still have been at the back of a waiting crowd, some distance from the blast.

As it turned out the queue was relatively small when he arrived. It meant that when the bomb hit, he and his sister were right beside the water station.

"When Lulu woke up, I told her to go and help her brother carry the water containers. It was as if the missile was waiting for her to arrive to strike that place," Heba said.

Ali Abu Zaid, 36, was one of the first on the scene, rushing to help survivors. As the dust and smoke cleared they revealed a horrific tableau.

"Each child was holding a water bucket, lying dead in place, covered in their own blood. The shrapnel had torn through their small bodies and disfigured their faces. The smell of gunpowder filled the area," he said.

People started loading the dead and injured on to donkey carts, as medical teams were slow to arrive, but there was nothing doctors could do for most of the victims.

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"Even if the ambulances had got there sooner, it wouldn't have made a difference. There was no saving anyone, these were lifeless bodies, completely shattered."

Ashraf raced out to look for his children as soon as he heard the blast, but arrived after their bodies had been taken away to find only blood-stained water containers scattered on the street, and a terrifying silence.

So he headed to hospital to continue the search, where he found their battered bodies laid out over the floor, and collapsed over them in grief. He married in his thirties, late for Gaza, and when his children arrived they became his world. Karam and Lulu's brutal deaths have shattered him.

"When I saw them like that, I felt as if my heart was being stabbed with knives," he said. "I'm still in shock. I've become constantly afraid of losing the rest of my family and being left alone. I feel like I'm going to lose my mind."

Heba also went to look for Lulu and Karam at the water station but then headed back to the shelter, hoping to find them waiting with their father. Perhaps she had learned a kind of grim optimism from previous brushes with death.

The siblings had been rescued from the rubble of their home when an airstrike brought it down on top of them earlier in the war, and survived injuries after another bomb hit nearby. "They survived twice, but not the third time," Heba said.

Word had reached the school, but even in Gaza, where no family has escaped tragedy, Heba's loss was shocking.

"The news of their martyrdom was already spreading, but no one told me. No one dared to deliver such terrible news," Heba said. Instead they encouraged her to go look for them among the injured in al-Awda hospital.

There she found her husband, and the shattered bodies of their son and daughter.

Israel's military blamed the strike on a "malfunction" that it said caused a bomb targeting a militant to fall short. Ashraf questioned this. "They have the most advanced technology and know exactly where the missile will fall and who the target is. How could this be a mistake? A 'mistake' that killed both of my children."

"The entire world sees everything," Heba said. "Yet they close their eyes as if they don't."

Church strike Patriarchs get rare access to visit site

Angela Giuffrida
Rome

Israel has granted two senior Christian leaders rare access to Gaza after an Israeli strike on the Palestinian territory's only Roman Catholic church killed three people.

Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Catholic Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, and his Greek Orthodox counterpart, Theophilos III, led a delegation yesterday to the Holy Family Church, whose shelling the day before triggered international condemnation.

Israeli authorities, which strictly control access to the besieged territory, permitted the visit after Benjamin Netanyahu said his country "deeply regrets" the strike on the church, where hundreds of Palestinians, including children and people with disabilities, have been sheltering.

The Israeli prime minister blamed the strike on a "stray" tank round, without providing evidence.

Netanyahu called Pope Leo yesterday morning and during the conversation the pontiff reiterated his appeal for "a renewed impetus to negotiations, for a ceasefire and for an end to the war", the Vatican said in a statement.

Leo also expressed concern over the "dramatic" humanitarian situation in Gaza and stressed the urgent need to protect places of worship, the faithful and all people in the Palestinian territories and Israel, it added.

Ten people were wounded in the shelling, including Gabriel Romanelli, the church's priest, who used to receive daily calls from the late Pope Francis. He suffered light injuries to his right leg. Israel resumed its strikes yesterday, with at least 14 Palestinians reported to have been killed across Gaza.

The Greek Orthodox patriarchate said the visit was "a powerful expression" of church unity and solidarity.

Israel's military says it does not target religious sites but it has bombed mosques. The Jerusalem patriarchate said there had been "repeated assaults on Christian holy sites in Gaza".



▲ Theophilos III and Pierbattista Pizzaballa arrive at a Gaza hospital



▲ Sayfollah Musallet, 20, died after being beaten by Israeli settlers

West Bank Tributes to Florida shop owner killed by settlers

Joseph Gedeon

When Fatmah Muhammad thinks about her younger cousin Sayfollah Musallet, known as Saif, she pictures him behind the counter of his ice-cream shop in Tampa Bay, Florida, decorating Muhammad's *knafeh* with the same effort he brought to everything else.

She makes the dessert from scratch, and would sometimes ship it from California, where she lives, to Florida. Saif would sell the Palestinian dessert in his ice-cream shop, which carried treats from around the world.

Now, less than a year after opening that shop, Saif is dead - beaten to death by Israeli settlers on his family's farm in the occupied West Bank while he was visiting relatives. His death has left a family shattered and a community demanding answers.

Saif's eldest uncle, Hesam Musallet, said of his nephew: "He would walk into a room and the room would light up. If people were sitting down, he would shake hands with everybody."

Customers at the ice-cream shop told Fatmah how if someone came in short on cash, Saif would quietly cover their tab without making them feel embarrassed.

"He really made everyone feel like family," Fatmah remembers.

Born in Port Charlotte, Florida, Saif was the oldest of four children. His parents had moved the family to Palestine for his school years, before he returned to the US to live and work. A few years later, the ice-cream shop came to fruition.

"That business, when he got it, was failing," Hesam says. "But he went in there, he turned it around. He had a passion for it ... People would just come back for his customer service."

For Saif, his summer trip back home to the West Bank village of Batn al-Hawa near Jerusalem was routine - a chance to reconnect with extended family.

On the day he was killed, Saif was at his family's farm in Bten al-Hawa, in Area B of the West Bank - officially under Palestinian administrative control but also under Israeli security control.

According to witnesses, settlers had come to the land, chopping down olive trees and burning crops.

A confrontation escalated, and Saif was beaten with clubs. His friend Mohammed Nael Hijaz was the first to reach him. "He was not moving when I got there and he could barely breathe," Hijaz said. "There was time to save him."

But ambulances were blocked by Israeli forces for three hours, his family said in a statement. During that time, Saif remained conscious, gasping and vomiting, held in the arms of his younger brother. Another young man, 23-year-old Razek Hussein al-Shalabi, was shot and left to bleed to death in the same attack. When ambulances finally reached them, they too were attacked by settlers. Saif was pronounced dead before reaching the hospital.

The Israeli military claimed the altercation developed after stones were thrown at Israelis and said it was looking into the incident.

More than 1,000 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank since 7 October 2023, and at least 9,000 have been injured.

The family's devastation is compounded by what they see as indifference from the US government. The US ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee, posted on social media on Tuesday that Israel must "aggressively investigate the murder". But the family is well aware that the prospect of arresting violent settlers is rare. Trump has rescinded Biden-era sanctions on Israeli settler groups accused of attacking Palestinians in the occupied West Bank. Still, the family is calling on the US to conduct its own investigation.

Nearing his 21st birthday, Saif had told his father that he was ready to find a wife and settle down. "He was not just a number," Fatmah says. "He was a friend to everyone. I don't want him to be forgotten."