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Nadira Huda's Cairo Diaries

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13 Rivers Trust



21st October 2024

I travelled to Cairo, Egypt from 21st to 24th October 2024 as part of a delegation from 13 Rivers Trust. Our main purpose was to meet with **Palestinian orphans** who had escaped Gaza with their mothers and entered Egypt. Most of their fathers and other family members had been **martyred** in Gaza.

We arrived at Cairo airport in the evening, and by the time we obtained our visas, passed through immigration, and collected our luggage, there was only enough time to check into the hotel, have a quick meal, and get some rest.



Nadira Huda's Cairo Diaries

13 Rivers Trust

22nd October 2024

The day started with introductions and a briefing on our activities for the day.

We went to the Palestinian Hospital to have a better understanding of the work it does and explore how to support its activities. The **Palestine Hospital in Cairo** was **established in 1975 by Dr. Fathi Arafat**, the brother of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Dr. Arafat founded the hospital to provide medical services to the Palestinian community in Egypt, including those displaced from Palestine. The **hospital's name reflects its mission to serve Palestinians, offering healthcare to those in need**. In the main lobby, portraits of Dr. Arafat and his brother are displayed side by side, serving as poignant reminders of their dedication and commitment to Palestine.

The **building is architecturally stunning**, there are beautiful examples of tatreez embroidery in the meeting rooms and hallways. Yet, the **hospital lacks the necessary facilities and equipment to meet the growing demand on its services**. It sadly lacks the infrastructure that the demands of the destruction of Gaza has placed upon it. There were **only three incubators in the whole hospital**. Medical staff, administrators and maintenance workers are dedicated, hard working and doing their best but without financial backing they cannot move forward. The hospital has only four operating rooms, it needs to upgrade its lab machines, which are 50 years old. it needs a dialysis unit, it needs fully operational lifts. Even the laundry room needs an overhaul as the few washing machines and dryers cannot deal with the need for clean bedding and hospital gowns that are required daily.

Palestinians who have been forced to leave Gaza and come to Egypt cannot access government hospitals there. While private healthcare is an option, many lack the financial means to afford it. The Palestinian Hospital anticipates that, in the event of a ceasefire, an even greater number of people will seek its services, as it **maintains a commitment to serve all Palestinians without discrimination**. The hospital administration is actively developing a strategic plan to expand its capacity, integrate information systems that connect with global networks, and invite medical professionals from around the world to contribute their expertise. The projected cost of this expansion is estimated at 18 million dollars. **If the border opened, the hospital estimates that it will be seeing 500 people a day, most of them will be from Gaza. It is preparing for that day.** In the hospital **we saw survivors enduring intense pain, and seeing their suffering was heart-wrenching**. It felt deeply unfitting to stand as an observer to another human being's agony. One man had both his legs held together by metal pins, his face contorted by pain.

Nadira Huda's Cairo Diaries

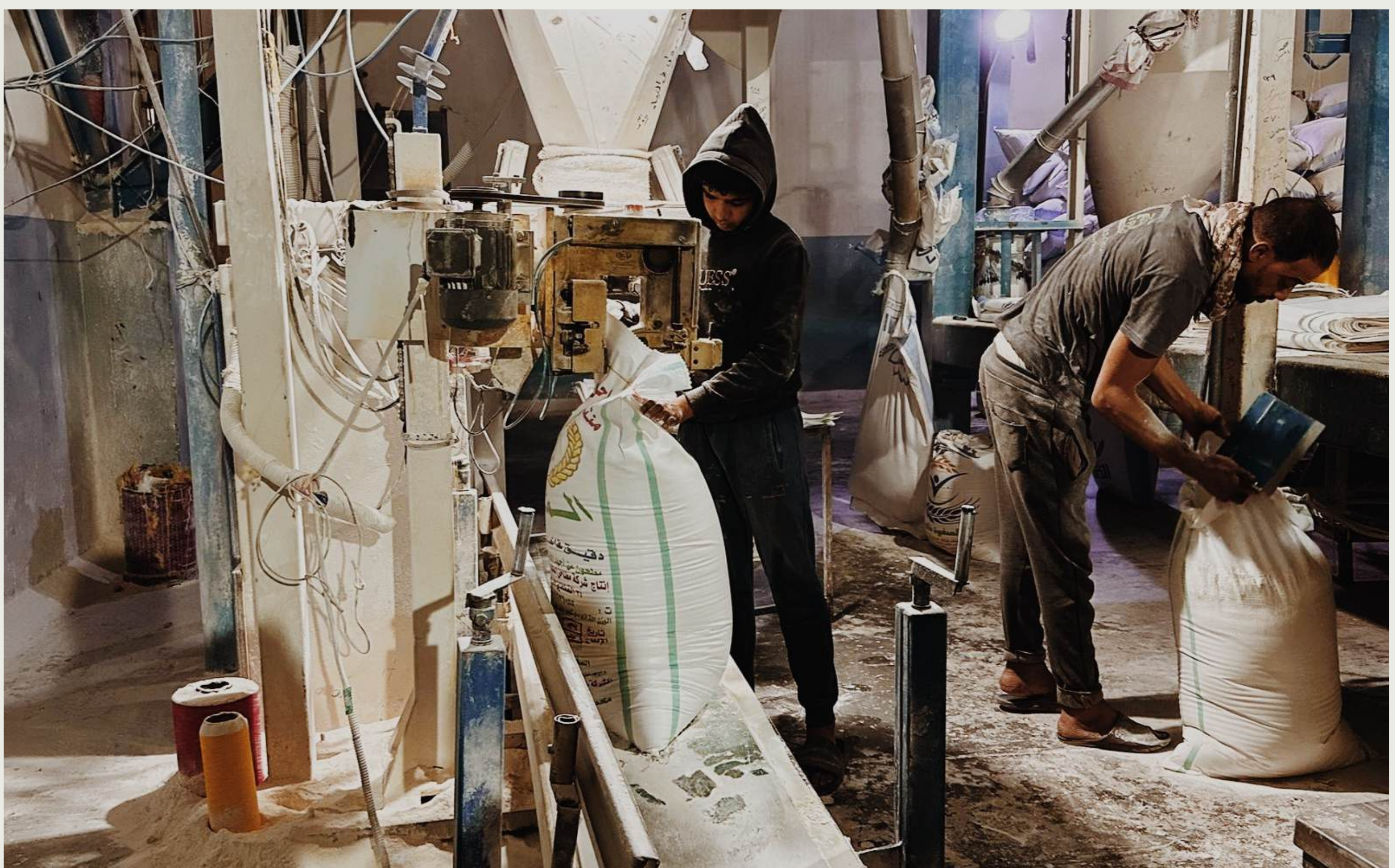
13 Rivers Trust

22nd October 2024

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I was left with the sense that **no level of compassion or empathy** can fully capture the reality faced by the people of Gaza. While our hearts ache for them, we cannot claim to truly comprehend the full extent of their suffering, nor should we attempt to say we do.

Yet, without our bearing witness—without recording what we have seen, speaking out, and challenging the dominant Western narrative—how will history remember, and how will future generations understand the genocide against the Palestinian people? **This is a duty for all conscientious individuals, to stand with the people of Gaza who first brought to light through social media the images of death, destruction, and suffering inflicted upon them.**



Nadira Huda's Cairo Diaries

13 Rivers Trust

22nd October 2024

From the hospital we visited an **agency that is working with medical staff still operating within Gaza**. One member of this agency is a **doctor** and worked tirelessly, without rest, when she was in Gaza. **Several members of her family were martyred, including her sister**. She spoke about her experiences without emotions, **every sentence ended with 'Alhamdulillah', all praise to Allah**. I watched this young, dignified woman and imagined myself in her situation. I did not think I could be so strong, so stoic in the aftermath of my family being wiped away. I later asked her about stress. She said she is human, she is stressed but, 'Allah gives us strength to deal with this evil. We really don't know how we get this strength'. **The agency gave us a breakdown of all the hospitals in Gaza from the North to the South. Al Shifa Hospital built in 1946, before the occupation, the cornerstone hospital in the Gaza strip, is now in ruins.**



The health situation In Gaza is in catastrophe. In North Gaza 810 health workers have been martyred by occupation forces, 1,000 wounded, 19 hospitals are out of service, 130 ambulances have been destroyed and 310 medical staff have been detained.

The health situation In Gaza is in catastrophe. In North Gaza 810 health workers have been martyred by occupation forces, 1,000 wounded, 19 hospitals are out of service, 130 ambulances have been destroyed and 310 medical staff have been detained. **The Indonesian Hospital is functioning at 30% of its capacity.** Yet despite this, **Al Shifa recently opened an emergency room amongst its ruins**. Specialist clinics are being set up in areas consisting of 2 Specialists, 1GP, 4 Nurses, 1 Pharmacists and 1 media personnel. 88% of all the primary health services are closed so these small teams are very important, they relieve the hospitals as they are no longer providing primary health care.

An agreement was signed recently with the Gaza ministry of Health to create a field hospital in the yard of Al Shifa Hospital. If it is targeted again by occupation forces, **'we will rebuild it again. We will move again, build it again and again. We don't care'**. This statement made with so much passion conveyed a powerful message: resistance rooted in a shared commitment to persevere, against an occupation force committing genocide.

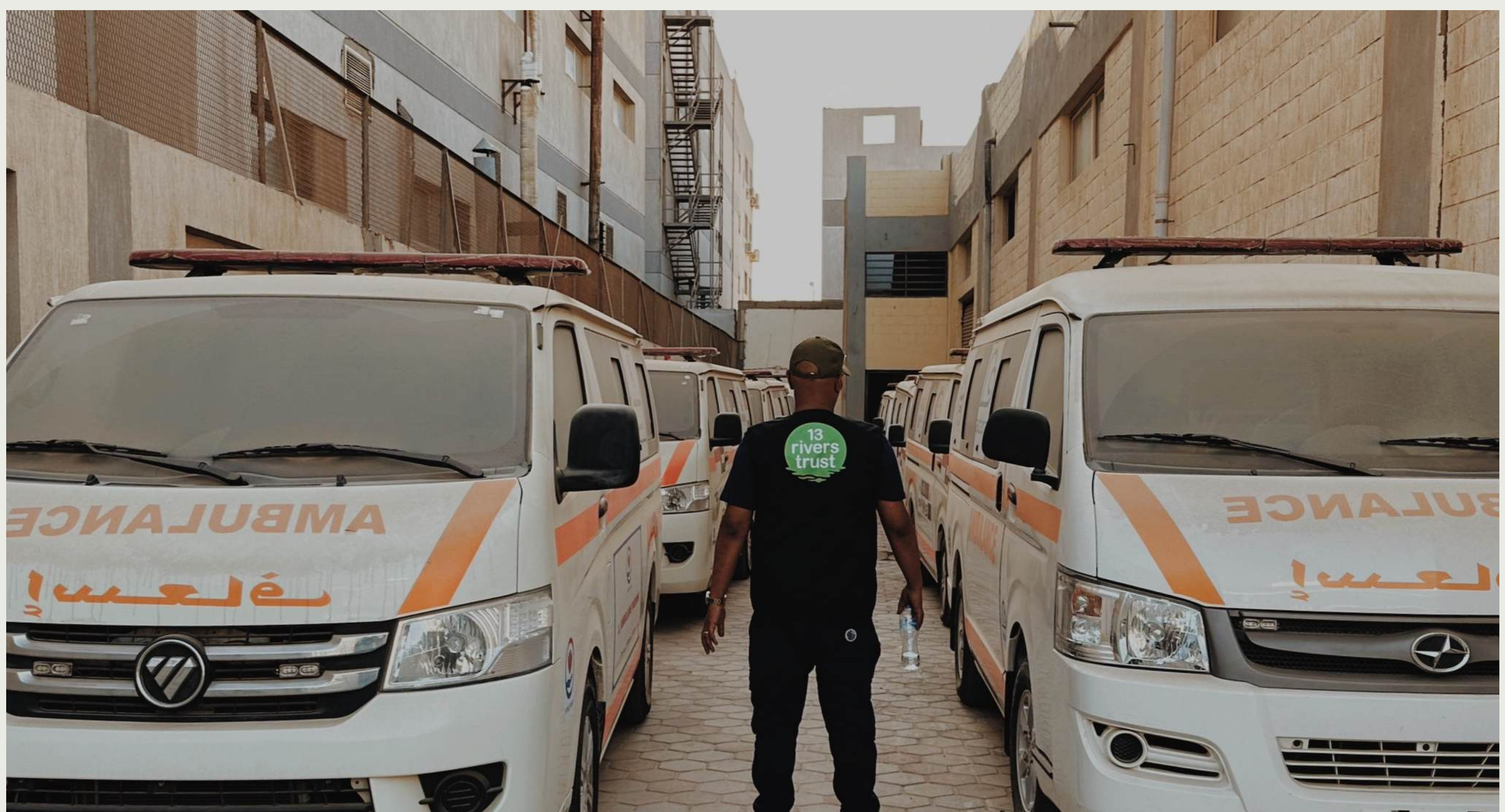
Nadira Huda's Cairo Diaries

13 Rivers Trust

22nd October 2024

One agency worker made a comment that resonated deeply. He shared that the occupation forces had invested half a billion dollars in promoting their agenda, yet, "our Muslim communities crushed it." **He was talking about the strength of social media and how it had shifted the narrative, exposing the lies of the occupation forces and gathering widespread support for the Palestinian cause globally.** Hearing this made all the time I had spent on social media sharing, liking, and commenting on the injustices committed by the occupation forces feel completely worthwhile although at the time I despaired at having to 'like' the most horrific of images. After our meeting with the agency, we visited a workshop where ambulances are constructed. Each ambulance must meet the exact requirements set by the occupation forces; otherwise, they are not permitted to cross the border. As someone ironically noted, the ambulances are not only built to their specifications but seem to be bombed to their specifications as well. **A fleet of ambulances is ready to cross the border when it opens. We also visited a flour factory where bags of flour were stacked high, ready to be sent into Gaza as soon as the border opens.**

As we drove back to our hotel, the sun was setting, illuminating the sky in shades of orange, red, and yellow. That same sun was setting over Gaza, but while I could sleep peacefully through the night, **what horrors awaited the people of Gaza in the darkness?**



Nadira Huda's Cairo Diaries

13 Rivers Trust

23rd October 2024

We met 50 Palestinian children today with their mothers. Most of their father's had been martyred. We wanted to offer the children small gifts we had brought from London, each chosen to suit their age and gender. All the children however seemed happy with their toys and the time we invested in thinking about the types of toys and games children experiencing trauma might benefit from seemed worthwhile.

We had rented a spacious hall for the children, giving them room to run around freely and safely. Highlights of the day included face painting, lively clowns, and a DJ playing "Ana Dammi Falestini" at full volume. The children danced with joy, and one little boy delighted us all with his fantastic Dabke moves. After lunch we sat with some of the mothers and they told us their stories via interpreters.

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The stories were painful to hear, our tears flowed, it was impossible to stop them. The word **sorry** was always on our lips, **sorry** that we as a ummah are helpless and hopeless, **sorry** for the pain, the losses, **sorry** for allowing evil to prevail. **Sorry** we could not save your loved ones.

As a grandmother myself, I felt a special connection to the story of a grandmother caring for her eight grandchildren, children of her only daughter and son who, along with their spouses, had been martyred. She recounted how they all lived in one building, and when it was bombed, the children were buried alive with their parents; two of them did not survive. Miraculously, the other children lived. The youngest was pulled out three hours after the attack, clinging to his deceased mother. He sustained injuries to his internal organs, and all the children now suffer from trauma. At night, they sleep with her, too fearful to be alone. **One of the grandchildren, Karim, cries constantly for his mother, and unable to console him, she tells him to look up at the sky and talk to his parents, reassuring him that his mother will hear him. Every night, Karim speaks to his mother.** She also takes Karim to a therapist, but it is costly and not free. She showed me another grandchild with a deep scar on his skull and wounds on his back, where shrapnel remains embedded. In time, this will affect his health.

Nadira Huda's Cairo Diaries

13 Rivers Trust

23rd October 2024

The grandmother explained that she now lives in a three-bedroom rented flat with her grandchildren, her daughter-in-law, and five other grandchildren. The interpreter told me that **this family was once well-known in Gaza; they lived in a beautiful villa, one son was an Architect, and the martyred son had been an Accountant.** The grandmother that although she had been widowed at the age of 30 she had a good life in Gaza . Now she has to survive on the savings they brought with them. People might consider them lucky to have had the means to leave Gaza, but what will happen when those savings run out? **Her surviving child remains in Gaza, and she worries for him constantly.** At a time when she should be free from the responsibilities of parenting, she has instead taken on the role of parent again, thinking about the welfare of her grandchildren. **Yet, throughout our conversation, she repeatedly said, “Alhamdulillah.”** When we asked her why, after enduring so much, she still found solace in this word, she broke down and said, “What else do I have? What can I do?”

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At that moment, I found myself reflecting on the word **resilience**, which we often use to describe the Palestinians.

At that moment, I found myself reflecting on the word **resilience**, which we often use to describe the Palestinians. We use it so easily, almost forgetting that we are talking about fellow humans who feel and have experienced the depths of pain and loss over generations. The grandmother's story and her tears were a humbling reminder that those who are viewed resilient often do not have the luxury of softness or rest and that they bear a burden that should not be romanticised.



Nadira Huda's Cairo Diaries

13 Rivers Trust

23rd October 2024

Speaking with the grandmother and the other mothers that day, we were **reminded of how deeply they value education**. Many of the **adult daughters we met had trained as dentists, doctors, and engineers in Gaza**. Unfortunately, the Egyptian State does not permit Gazan children to attend local schools, so these children must study online, often using just their mother's phone. Sometimes, two or three children gather to access the Palestinian curriculum, a difficult setup, especially when different age groups need age-appropriate classes. With a single shared phone, someone is always left out, often the younger ones who aren't yet preparing for exams. But early education is essential for all ages, and missing these classes sets young children back.

The mothers asked little from us, they requested help in securing their children's education. Right now, this help would mean each child having access to a tablet or computer, allowing them to learn without the barriers they currently face.



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Nadira Huda's Cairo Diaries

13 Rivers Trust

24th October 2024

Today was truly uplifting. We were able to provide 20 families with tablets, giving their children a valuable tool to continue their education. Though it may be just a small step given the overwhelming need, the joy on the children's faces and their thanks made it incredibly meaningful.

A mother from Khanyounis shared her hopes for her children's future, emphasising the importance she places on their education. **She dreams of sending her daughter and son to university in Egypt next year, giving them a real opportunity for a stable future.** Since her husband's passing in 2021, she has been raising five children alone. Once a preschool teacher in Gaza, she now relies on donations for essentials, from clothing for her children to their daily meals, and she has not had meat in months due to careful budgeting.

For her, university means more than education—it's a chance for her children to find steady work and gradually lift the family out of poverty. She expressed a hope for support from abroad to help with her children's university fees, around £3,000 each, so they can take this step toward a better life. After lunch, we joined some of the mothers and their children at an adventure park. The day was beautiful, sunny and warm. The mothers chatted together, sipping coffee and keeping a watchful eye on their children as they ran and played nearby. They never let them out of sight—and who could blame them, even on this peaceful day they could never take security for granted.



Nadira Huda's Cairo Diaries

13 Rivers Trust

24th October 2024

One mother arrived with two teenage girls. I assumed they were her daughters, but soon learned that one of the girls was actually her friend's child. Both of the girl's parents had been martyred. Without hesitation, this mother had taken her friend's daughter into her own family, caring for her as her own, despite the many losses she herself had endured. **In Gaza compassion transcends personal suffering.**



It was our last day with the families before flying back. **The smiles and laughter on that day were ethereal, a glimpse of innocence and joy. It is almost impossible to comprehend that such beautiful children are lying beneath rubble, buried alive, limbs torn apart, heads severed from their bodies and burnt alive.** How can such horror exist and be justified by the evil men and women of this world whilst their media covers up their crimes.

Nadira Huda's Cairo Diaries

13 Rivers Trust



The Palestinians of Gaza are special people. Despite facing immense inhumanity, they show strength and compassion. The mother who took in her friend's child, even while coping with her own losses, exemplifies the way they support each other when it matters most.

Education represents hope for a brighter future, even though it can be difficult to attain in current circumstances.

The children's smiles reminded us of the importance of small, everyday moments of normality that have been torn away from them.

My short time in Cairo revealed the **strength of human connection and the essential role of practical support systems.** It became clear that, while resilience is necessary, it should not be the only choice available. **Beyond resilience, there is a need for real, lasting changes that enables individuals and families to move towards a life marked by peace, security and dignity, free from oppression.**

I do not know if I will see the people of Palestine achieve freedom. Yet, I hold onto the belief that this day will come.



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