



# The waiting game

A million people live in the Gaza Strip, 60 per cent of whom have been refugees since the Israeli-Arab war in 1948. According to the Oslo peace accords, their status should have been reviewed in May 1996, but negotiations were delayed following the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as Israeli prime minister.

While the population density of the Gaza Strip has already reached the figure of 1,800 inhabitants per square kilometre, it is in the refugee camps that it is at its greatest. Unemployment affects 60 per cent of the active population in

the Gaza Strip, regardless of whether Israel imposes closures on the autonomous territories or not. Permits to work in Israel are reserved for married men with at least two children.

As local journalist Fayez says: "History weighs on our people." Despite everything they have suffered since 1948, the Palestinians are extraordinarily patient and smiling. "But," adds Fayez, "here anger mounts in waves. For months, people smile and put up with the situation and, suddenly, as in September 1996, their fury explodes. They call it Intifada, do you know why?"

Because the word suggests the action of an animal — a dog or a bear — shaking off the dust. For months we take it, and it accumulates on our skin and then suddenly we shake ourselves, and since we are all together, the earth shakes."

In October 1996 I spent six days with the refugees in Gaza. From Jaballah to Shati, from Dir El Balah to Khan Younis, here are some of the scenes of poverty and unemployment that I encountered.

Photos and commentary by Anne Nosten



▲ Each family has a minimum of seven children. In the Jaballah and Dir el Balah camps, several dozen children suffer from malnutrition, while dysentery affects 50 per cent of the poorest children.





▲ In the camps, running water is scarce and its distribution is interrupted for several hours a day. Since the water is salty and unhealthy, refugees prefer to drink the water from plastic jerry cans brought in on carts pulled by donkeys.

► Of all the scenes in the refugee camps, the most moving is that of these groups of men with nothing to do but sit on chairs in the alleys. They are imprisoned in the Gaza Strip, a stretch of land barely a hundred kilometres long and ten kilometres wide. They cannot get to their work places in Israel as long as the territories are closed.



▲ Steel structures on the beach serve as playgrounds for Palestinian children.

▼ Open sewers run through the camp.



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