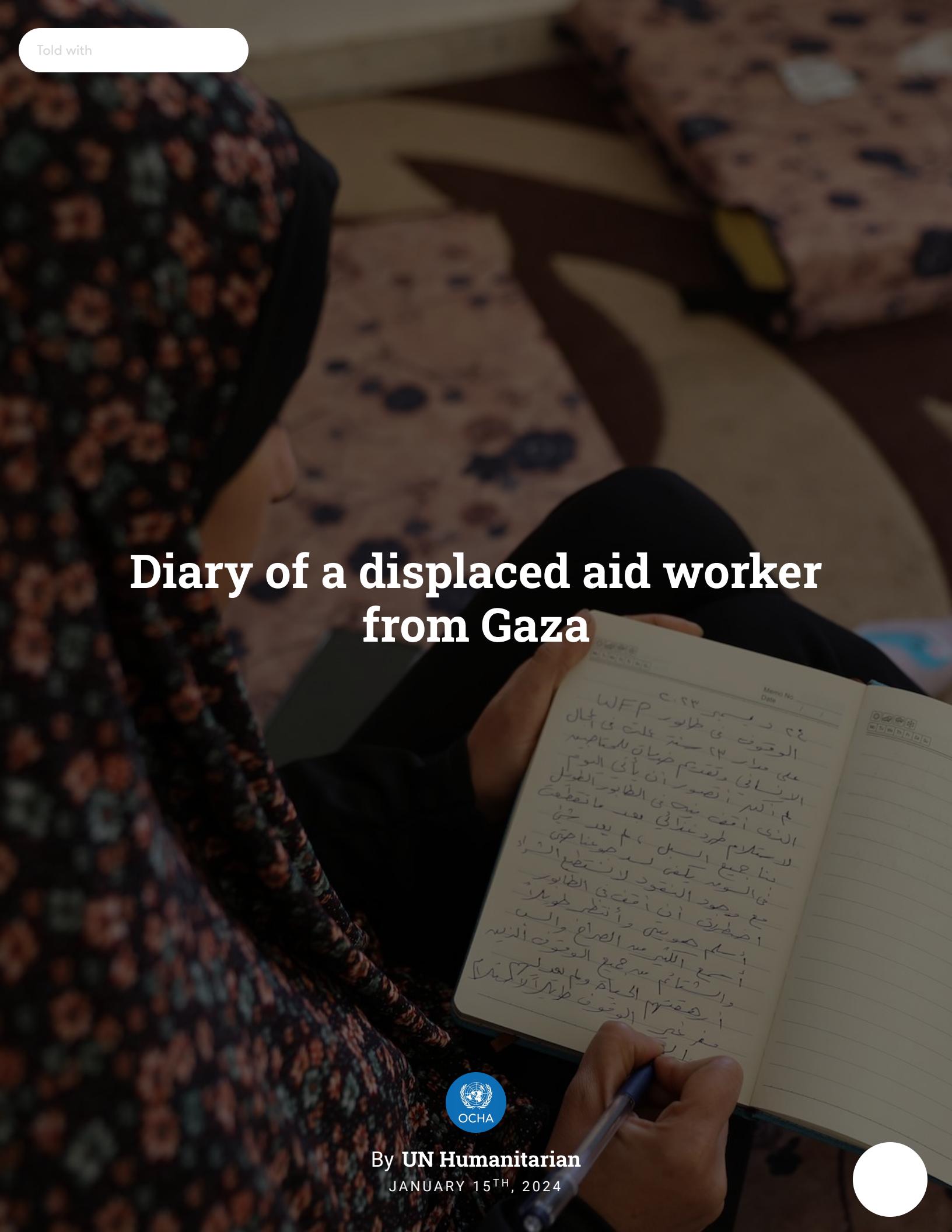
Told with

Diary of a displaced aid worker from Gaza



By **UN Humanitarian**

JANUARY 15TH, 2024

When the war began on 7 October, life changed dramatically overnight for Hala – a mother of four and a humanitarian worker from Gaza.

Hala is a Programme Coordinator at the non-governmental organization Alianza-ActionAid, which helps affected women with services including psychosocial support and cash assistance. But she and her family are now displaced.

Hala shared her diary entries of the early days of the conflict, which so far has killed more than 22,000 people, displaced nearly 2 million people and left half a million facing famine.

14 October

In the dead of night, I find myself on the street, running with my husband and children. We are scared and tired. We've been displaced six times since we fled our home in Gaza. Carrying only our IDs, we finally find refuge in Rafah in an abandoned apartment that we share with two other displaced families.

18 October

I've just come back home with my phone charged; we don't have electricity. A neighbour who has solar panels offered to charge phones for people.

Whenever I have Internet access and notifications flood my screen, I feel how disconnected I have been. I've just learned from a Facebook post about the death of my best friend's baby, Khaled. I try to call my mom, who stays with my brother's family in Khan Younis, but the message I always hear is: "The number you are calling is not available, please try later."

22 October

Tonight, like many others, sleep deserts me. I keep checking on my children huddled around me on the floor, covered by a thin bedsheet. My brief moments of rest are interrupted by my children's cries amid hostilities and occasional visits from cockroaches.

28 October

It took us 15 days to get domestic water, and when we finally did, we had to make do with cold showers. The place lacks everything, even a toilet.

15 November

I go to the local market. There is nothing to buy. The shops are almost empty, with no flour and not even yeast. Whatever is available is far more expensive than its actual price. For a while, we have been eating mainly pasta and lentil soup.

ocal shops ran out of supplies in Rafah, which has been the main refuge for

Ceasefire 24 November

Today marks the beginning of the ceasefire pause. It's one of the best days I've had in a while. I seized the opportunity to see my brothers, whom I haven't seen since the hostilities started.

The week-long humanitarian pause offered a respite, allowing the UN and partners to get trucks into Gaza loaded with vital aid and fuel, provide assistance to hundreds of thousands of people, and evacuate critical patients.

27 November

It is winter now and the cold weather is adding to the challenges. We fled home during warmer days. The place we live in is bitterly cold. I light up garbage in a barrel for some warmth. After enduring over 50 days of displacement, I've managed to get blankets and buy second-hand winter clothes.

Fighting resumes 1 December

The pause has ended and hostilities resume. We had high hopes that the pause would extend, but it didn't. Fear grips us, leaving us alive but far from fine. A new wave of displacement from Khan Younis City, at the south of the Strip, increased the number of people seeking refuge in Rafah. With existing shelters at full capacity, many families have resorted to setting up makeshift tents using plastic sheets on pavements outside the shelters, while many others are forced to stay on the streets.

I visit shelters in Rafah. It's heart breaking. The conditions are dreadful. Each classroom now houses between five and seven families, and there's even a family sleeping in the elevator. The

queues for the bathrooms seem never ending, and the hygiene situation is disastrous.

Women and children in particular are facing immense challenges in shelters. I recently met a new mother who gave birth to a girl. She was desperately searching for a cradle or any solution, since she and her baby sleep on the cold floor. She wraps her infant in multiple thin fabrics, as she lacks winter clothes.

Hala does most of her work as a Programme Coordinator online when she can get an Internet connection. However, in early December she voluntarily held awareness sessions in displacement shelters.

2 December

Today has been a very difficult day. Due to the intensifying hostilities, my brother insisted my 80-year-old mother join others in a car heading to Rafah to flee from Khan Younis, as there was no space in that car for him and his family. Upon arriving in Rafah, and with the ongoing hostilities and poor communication, my mother got lost on

the streets. Those were the most harrowing hours of my life until my other displaced brother in Rafah was able to locate and reach her.

7 December

Today, my aunt died from kidney failure. Struggling to access dialysis, she hadn't undergone the procedure for a month. She passed away in Deir Al-Balah, and unfortunately none of her seven children were present.

8 December

My sister Sama phoned me before dawn. She told me she had to flee from Khan Younis and was calling while on a street with her children. They had no place to go, and hostilities were ongoing. Then the call was cut. I couldn't reach her until the afternoon, when I learned she had found shelter with an extended family.

10 December

I think about our home in Gaza, newly renovated just a few months ago. I worry about our beautiful cat, Smoky, whom I had to leave behind. I left some food for him and opened the windows to allow him to leave. I wonder what happened to him.

14 December

Today is my birthday. I am turning 45 years old. This birthday is like no other. Every year, I usually celebrate with my family and friends. My husband asks me: "What would you like to have for a gift?" I say: "Get us some firewood so I can make a fire to cook." I know there is nothing he can get, but he said that to show his love.

15 December

My youngest sister, Nashwa, who is also displaced in Rafah, reached out asking for any food we had. I gave her a few cans of beans and tuna that we had. I thought my children are old enough to endure hunger, but hers are young.

22 December

It's the birthday of Um Jabr, my friend in displacement. I don't usually form quick friendships, but Um Jabr and I went through many shared experiences, including lighting fires for warmth, baking bread, collecting water with jerry cans and washing clothes by hand. She always mentions to me that she loves drinking instant coffee, and she hasn't had it for two months. My family and hers have gone on searching missions to find coffee for her, as shops in Rafah are empty, and today we finally managed to buy five small bags.

23 December

Today, I want to resume writing. I stopped for a while due to frustration, sadness and fear. However, today I was able to call my neighbour and friend Hanan, who is still in north Gaza. She had been in her ninth month of pregnancy when I last saw her. She told me she gave birth at home as there are no accessible health facilities. Luckily, in the same building where Hanan stays there is a displaced nurse who helped her deliver. Hanan is from Syria and witnessed the Syrian war, but she got married to a Palestinian and came to live in Gaza. I worry about Hanan and how she will find food to survive, as well as her baby, for whom she had long waited.

Hala writes in her diary about her displacement experiences in Rafah after fleeing

er home in October. ©OCHA/Ziad Taleb

25 December

It was an extremely sad day. I received the news of the death of my colleague Rawda and her entire family. She was a nurse working at Al-Awda Hospital. Rawda loved life. She enjoyed telling jokes and laughed a lot. She was also passionate about photography. As soon as she set her eyes on me, she would say: "Come on, Hala, let's take a picture together!" In the afternoon, I received news of the death of my daughters' friends. I no longer know whom to console or with whom to find comfort.

28 December

The situation in Rafah has become catastrophic since the massive influx of movement towards the south. Rafah is the smallest city in the strip. It has limited services. The city, which can normally accommodate 200,000 people, is now hosting more than 1 million. The streets are crowded with tents. My family and I have helped many families set up their tents, but they keep collapsing over their heads when it rains. The main problem is the lack of latrines for these people.

Girls clearing rainwater with brooms in a shelter yard in the city of Khan Yo
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31 December

New Year's Eve has always been a day of big family gatherings with local dishes and sweets, because we love life. This year, I made tea and popcorn, and we gathered with other displaced families, covered in blankets. We prayed for the dead and injured, and we hoped that the war would come to an end and 2024 would bring hope and peace.

4 January

Today, after more than two months, we finally bought a pack of eggs. Eggs have disappeared from the market, along with chickens. How could they not? The cold is unbearable for humans, let alone chickens. The pack of eggs cost 55 shekels (US$15) today. We used to buy a pack for 12 shekels ($3). My children celebrated, took pictures of the pack and sent them to their brother in Türkiye and their friends with the caption: "We have a treasure."

6 January

We have a WhatsApp group that includes my siblings, our children and me. Since the first day of the war, we have been checking on each other every morning and trying to call those without Internet access. Today, the first message was from my sister Amal. It said: "Our house is gone." It was a shock because Amal's place is considered the big family house, hosting all gatherings and birthday parties. The best 'maftoul' (a local dish) you can eat is in this house. Amal saw the footage of her house, razed to the ground, on TV news. Another piece of bad news was shared soon after. My niece, Nour, said that her house was destroyed, too. Nour had moved there only 10 days before the war began. She bought carpets and had not unfolded them yet. To build this house, her family lived modestly, cutting back on various expenses to save for their home. She sold her gold jewelry and borrowed money from everyone. The house was gone before we saw it. The dream ended before starting.

You Can Help

Civilians are paying a horrific price for the ongoing war. Over 3 million people in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank need urgent humanitarian aid and protection.

You can help families caught up in this catastrophic situation.

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