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## Hard times drive Gazans into perilous 'buffer zone'

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Basam and Mustapha Adwan make for a sorry sight. In their small, cramped house in northern Gaza, which they share with 12 other family members, 24-year-old Basam sits in a wheelchair. His younger brother Mustapha sits on the floor, his crutches by his side. Both men have heavily bandaged right feet. They say they were shot by Israeli soldiers while working close to the border. "Normally they give a warning shot," says Basam, who says he was shot a month ago. "But this time there was no warning. The bullet went right through my foot." He winces as he remembers the pain.

Trade flourishing

The two brothers were working, collecting rubble and gravel from the abandoned industrial areas in northern Gaza, close to the Erez crossing into Israel. Each day, scores of young men can be found doing the same. It is hard, dirty work loading rubble onto donkey carts - rubble which can then be recycled to make bricks. The trade has flourished due to the shortage of construction materials in Gaza. On a good day the brothers say they make between \$10 and \$15 (£6-£9) each. But it is dangerous work. The United Nations says 11 Palestinians civilians, including four children, have been killed by Israeli fire in the past six months in the restricted areas around Gaza's borders. It says at least 70 civilians have been injured in the same period, including at least 49 who were working collecting rubble and scrap metal. Some say the figures are even higher. "At this hospital alone, in the last six months we have had over 60 patients who were shot while collecting rubble near the border," says Basam al-Masri, head of orthopaedics at the Kamal Edwan hospital in Beit Lahiya in northern Gaza. Mr Masri says nearly all of them were shot in the legs or feet.

"There was one who was shot in the chest who died. Four or five others had to have a leg amputated."

Mr Masri says most of the patients were young men or teenagers. He says all of them were civilians.

'Protection'

But Israel says what it calls the "buffer zone" needs to be enforced to protect Israeli communities living just over the border from Gaza.

"The question is why are these Palestinians approaching the fence in the first place, when they know this area is a buffer zone and they cannot enter," says Lt Col Avital Liebovich, a spokesperson for the Israeli Defence Force.

She says that in 2010 there have been 67 attempts by Palestinian militants to plant explosive devices along the border, as well as more than 30 occasions when militants have opened fire. She says the "buffer zone" is needed to protect Israelis from sniper fire and rocket attacks. In the past 18 months, one Thai farm worker in Israel has been killed by a rocket fired from Gaza. In 2010, according to IDF figures, 180 rockets and mortars have been fired into Israel by militants.

The UN says that in 2010, 55 Palestinians, including 22 civilians, have been killed by Israeli military action in Gaza. The UN says more than 200 Palestinians have been injured in the same period.

When asked why the Israeli soldiers are compelled to shoot Palestinians working near the border, as opposed to firing warning shots, Col Liebovich says when Israeli lives are at risk they cannot take chances.

She cites an example from May this year when a young boy approached the fence carrying explosives on the back of a donkey cart.

Distance dispute

Basam and Mustapha Adwan say they have no connection with any militant group in Gaza. Col Liebovich says the "buffer zone" is only enforced to 300m (980ft) but the UN and many Palestinians dispute this.

"You cannot go within a kilometre of the fence or they - the Israelis - will shoot you," says Khalil Zanin, who grows oranges on his farm in Beit Hanoun in northern Gaza close to the border.

From the roof of Mr Zanin's house you can clearly see the border with Israel. From there, he points out all the farmland he says he has lost because Israel has deemed certain areas in Gaza restricted.

"The Zanin family has lost around 60,000 sq m [14.8 acres] of farmland close to the fence," he says. "The Israelis have bulldozed much of it and it is not safe to go there."

The UN estimates that more than 30% percent of arable land in Gaza has been lost to the "buffer zone". It says this has had a devastating impact on Gaza's farming community and the Gaza Strip's economy.

Col Liebovich denies that the Israel military fired on people working more than 300m from the border.

Israel withdrew its forces from Gaza in 2005 but continues to control its borders as well as Gaza's airspace and access to the sea.

When passing through Erez, the main Israeli border crossing with Gaza, it is not uncommon to hear the sound of gunfire from the Israeli watch towers.

But despite the risks, the sandy dunes along the border remain dotted with Palestinian workers.

And sitting nursing their injuries in Beit Hanoun, Basam and Mustapha Adwan say that if they recover they will return to collecting rubble and gravel close to Erez.

"What else can we do?" asks Basam. "There are no other jobs around here."

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