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Gaza reeling from humanitarian crisis brought on by war

Aftermath of recent round of fighting includes grossly overloaded hospitals, mounds of debris and bodies still buried under the rubble.

By Jack Khoury | Aug. 7, 2014 | 7:07 PM

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For many residents of the Gaza Strip, Wednesday, the second day of the cease-fire was an opportunity to search the ruins and recover the bodies of people still considered missing.

Five unidentified bodies were found by rescue services in Rafah, while in the Zeitoun neighborhood of Gaza City, the body of Sha'aban Saliman Al-Dahdouh, 34, was found under the ruins of a building bombed by the Israel Air Force on July 21. Dahdouh was a senior commander of the Al-Quds Brigades, the military arm of Islamic Jihad, and commanded a brigade in Zeitoun.

According to the Palestinian health ministry, the Gaza death toll exceeds 1,880 people, among them 430 children, 243 women and 79 elderly people. More than 9,500 people have been wounded, among them 2,878 children, 1,886 women and 374 elderly people.

A delegation of physicians from the West Bank, most of them surgeons and orthopedists, came to Gaza on Wednesday to assist the local medical teams, whose members are on the verge of collapse. The physicians said that Gaza's hospitals are suffering serious shortages of beds and medical equipment. They also said that many of the more than 100 patients in intensive care units need to be transferred to hospitals in the West Bank because of overcrowding, unsterile conditions and the lack of means to treat them. The Palestinians said the issue is being discussed with the Israeli authorities.

Haaretz has learned from military sources that Israel took 159 prisoners during the operation, all of whom were transferred to Israeli territory for questioning. Twenty-five of them are still in custody; the rest have been released back to Gaza.

A major challenge facing Gazan officials is the removal of the huge quantities of debris. Rescue services say that entire neighborhoods bombed by the Israel Air Force will have to be cleared of rubble before rebuilding can begin.

Senior PLO official Saeb Erekat has called for humanitarian aid to the Strip by any means possible – land, sea, or air. The first such assistance arrived on Wednesday, as convoys from Kuwait and Egypt entered the Gaza Strip through the Rafah crossing. The United Arab Emirates has set up a field hospital in Khan Yunis. Rescue and medical officials said the aid most needed at this stage is drinking water, food, and clothing, while at a later stage they will focus on finding housing solutions for those displaced.

Gazans are assuming that it will take many months to relieve the serious humanitarian crisis. All are eagerly awaiting reports from the cease-fire discussions in Cairo, hoping that progress is being made toward a long-term resolution.