

People in Gaza await easing of Israeli blockade

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The beach was teeming with children and their parents, and it seemed the whole neighborhood had come out to kick a ball, fly kites or just sit in the sand as the sun set in the Mediterranean Sea. So Muhammad Ali decided it was the perfect time to start a business, to try to sell corn on the beach.

Since the Israeli blockade of Gaza began three years ago, he said, he had been unable to find steady work. So on Monday he piled fresh-picked corn onto the back of a donkey cart, grabbed an old metal pot and with his 8-year-old son, Mahmoud, headed for the beach.

"There is no work, no electricity, no cooking gas," he said, as his son gently dropped corn into water boiling above a fire. "I sell corn."

Asked if he was more hopeful after Israel announced on Sunday that it would ease the blockade, Mr. Ali shrugged and smiled. "We are waiting to see if it happens," he said.

That was the response in communities across the southern and central Gaza Strip on Monday, a day after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that Israel would significantly expand the flow of goods overland into Gaza, an impoverished coastal Palestinian enclave.

"Let's see," said Ahmed Ali, a middle-school science teacher, as he sat with a friend in a park at sunset in the center of Gaza City.

After years and years of crisis, occupation, intra-Palestinian conflict, war with Israel and a three-year-long blockade, people here expressed satisfaction at their own resourcefulness and weariness with it all. They said they were not starving, but added that they were hardly thriving, caught in a world where there were limited options and few hopes for a better life.

"All of the people are in a bad situation," said Mohammed Omar, a math teacher who is a friend of Mr. Ali's. "It's psychological pressure."

The store shelves were filled on Monday in Rafah and in Deir al Balah and Gaza City, the shops stocked with all kinds of supplies, stoves, refrigerators, fans, generators — most smuggled through tunnels dug deep beneath the border with Egypt.

If the blockade were eased, many people said, and if more goods flowed across the border, their lives would feel better, but mostly at the margins.

They could buy cans of soda, as well as juices, cheeses and beans, that were not covered in sand; or chips that were not crushed; or appliances not banged up from being dragged through sandy, hot and humid tunnels. Prices would be cheaper, too, and, people said, there would be more variety. One shopkeeper complained that he could get only low-quality Chinese goods and would prefer to sell Israeli-made appliances.

"It will be so much better, and more clean," said Ziad Hassan, who was selling stoves and fans smuggled through the tunnels.

Already there were small signs that things were changing. Hummus, cabbage and beet salad were being imported across the border and showing up in small food shops. Canned fruit had only recently begun to arrive.

"Yes, yes, it's going to be better, the goods will be clean, not like from the tunnels," said Muhammad al Aidi, a clerk in a small food shop in Rafah as he held up a can of Coke Zero coated in a layer of sand. Every soda and juice can in his shop was covered with sand.

But people are not holding out for cans free of sand. What they want, what they need and what they are not certain that they will get from Israel fall into three general categories: construction materials to rebuild houses and offices destroyed during the war Israel launched in late 2008 in retaliation for Hamas rocket fire; freedom of movement in and out of Gaza; and ample raw materials to allow manufacturing to resume, and with that, job creation.

Hamas officials dismissed the Israeli announcement as a public relations stunt aimed at making the blockade more palatable without actually ending it.

"We are not in need of food — we need cement, gravel, iron, the materials to build," said Saud al Sultan, who said his house was destroyed in 2006 because it was in the area where Hamas militants planned and staged the strike that captured an Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit.

The blockade has kept Riham Madi and her family apart for three years. Her father, mother and brother are in Saudi Arabia. She is in Rafah, and she has been unable to get out. Her family has been afraid to come in, because they fear they would be unable to leave. Now she thinks that might change, and she credits the attention drawn by the Israeli attack on a flotilla trying to break the embargo, which killed nine passengers on one of the ships.

"Maybe the flotilla incident had a role to play with this, because it drew the world's attention to what was happening here in Gaza," she said as she walked home in the late afternoon.

"I am hoping to see my father and brother," she said. "God willing."

If there is one place where people are not eager to see the blockade eased, it is on the border with Egypt where many people have invested their money in digging the tunnels that snake beneath the sandy soil. The tunnel economy has kept Gaza stocked with all kinds of goods — even new cars, people here said — and it has provided tax revenues to the Hamas government. But as the blockade has slowly eased, the price smugglers exact to haul a bag underground has dropped from about \$300 to as little as \$10, said a tunnel owner who asked that he not be identified because of the nature of his work.

At a nearby tunnel, two partners, Hany and Mohammed, said that they could overcome any obstacle presented to them. Mohammed proudly displayed a large, heavy piece of steel that he said he had cut with a torch from an underground barrier that Egypt buried to try to block the tunnels. He and a worker had been hauling bags of cement up since the hole was cleared.

But what he could not overcome, he said, would be if the blockade was really lifted and goods suddenly flowed over the border. "Then," Hany said, "we will shut by ourselves."

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