**Thursday, February 15, 2024 / Rafah, the last “safe” zone**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

SCORING <Albatross (APM)>

NOEL KING (host, *Today, Explained*): Rafah is the southernmost city in Gaza. It had a population of about two-hundred thousand people. But after Israel declared war on Hamas after the attacks of 10/7, more than a million Palestinians fled south to Rafah. They have nothing, they exist “between the sky and the land,” a reporter told us. Despite criticism, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu plans a ground invasion of Rafah.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://twitter.com/atrupar/status/1756690454228189603/video/1)*> Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu: I think the people who are telling you, “oh, you can’t do it, you can’t go into Rafah under any conditions,” are basically saying “don’t win, lose.”*

NOEL: Facing all this, some people taking refuge have just stopped wondering what comes next.

*<CLIP> Aseel Mousa, freelance journalist (starts at 25:07 in the raw tape): If the people thought of what will happen after a ceasefire or after the end of this war, they will die. They will. They will die. They will die.*

NOEL: Coming up on *Today, Explained*: can four months of frantic diplomacy lead to a ceasefire before Rafah’s destruction?

**[THEME]**

ASEEL MOUSA (Palestinian freelance journalist): I am Aseel Mousa, Palestinian freelance journalist from the Gaza Strip. I work for the Guardian, The Intercept, Middle East Eye, Al Jazeera, and Electronic Intifada. I have been working as a journalist for two and a half years. Now I am in the city of Rafah, in the southern part of the Gaza Strip. This is my second displacement. On 13th of October, the Israeli authorities ordered the residents of the Gaza Strip to evacuate the northern Gaza Strip and to relocate to the south. So, consequently, my family and I sought refuge in Al-Maghazi refugee camp, where we stayed at my grandfather's house, along with approximately 40 other displaced individuals. The situation there was dire. We faced severe shortages of food, running water, and even the drinkable water. And even [though] Israel claimed that area as a safe area, I lost ten people of my family. Israel targeted the house of my cousins. And as a result, ten of my relatives were killed. Seven of them were children. And one of them was a woman. And the other was young man.

NOEL: That’s what brought Aseel and her surviving family to Rafah, down by Gaza’s border with Egypt. Rafah was a “safe” zone, but the Israeli offensive that began up north, has now come to Gaza’s southernmost point. To the north, is destruction. To the south, is Egypt, where most Palestianians can’t go. Aseel and more than a million other people are trapped.

SCORING IN <My, That Does Sound Serious>

ASEEL: Now I can hear the Israeli bombardment. I can see the civilians. I can see the people who are living in tents and in undescribable situations. On Monday, the residents of Rafah, along with the displaced people, endured a night of terror beyond description, it was a deadly night. The Israeli occupation unleashed a barrage of missiles and artillery shells on the city, resulting in the tragic loss of approximately 100 civilian lives. So that night, the house of refuge I am in was shaking. The windows of that house shattered. Actually, I consider myself super lucky to be in a house. The majority of people are now in the streets and in the tents. They are enduring severe cold. They don't have even clothes. Actually, I borrowed clothes from my cousins. When people left their homes and were displaced, they only took their IDs, their passports, their very essential needs. People cannot hold all the things that they may need to another home, or to another tent or to another refuge area or shelter.

SCORING BUMP

ASEEL: The Israeli bombardment is hard in itself, being under fire…

NOEL: Mm.

ASEEL: …under bombardment. But being under bombardment, without even the essential needs such as food, water, medical supplies, medicines, is making the problem or the tough time harder than enduring it with only bombing.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: As a journalist, you are also interviewing people in Rafah. What are you hearing that you think we should know?

ASEEL: Okay. Today I was in an interview with two sisters who are married to two brothers. They were in Khan Younis. They were in a building with their husbands and children. And they are civilians. They are civilians. The Israeli occupation targeted their home, leaving their husbands killed. And, ordering them or instructing them or forcing them to leave their home after bombing it. They let the women who are these two ladies, Sahar and Etesam. They ordered, they forced Sahar and Etesam and their children to evacuate this home. The two ladies told me, Aseel, we left our husbands in the streets. The body of their husbands, they are killed. And we run with our children. And we walked for a long time to reach a safer area. I cannot even imagine how they endured this. They left the bodies of their husbands on the streets.

NOEL: Hm.

ASEEL: Sahar told me, Aseel, I didn't have the chance to even hug him or to kiss his head or even to protect his body or to bury him. Actually, this was the hardest thing I hear today. In a different interview, I met a family who are displaced for three times. They are staying in a tent, in a very small tent. They actually have nothing to eat. They have, even the simplest essentials. They don't have them in the tent. They told me that, Aseel, that Monday night was terrifying. The situation was indescribable. We were very afraid. We decided to leave Rafah and to relocate once again. But we don't know where to go.

NOEL: Aseel, much of the international community is really angry about what's happening in Rafah. There is an understanding that people have been pushed into Rafah and have no place else to go. And so why would Israel conduct a bombardment of this place that essentially feels like a last stand for civilians. Now, when Israel is asked about that, Israeli leaders say Rafah is the last Hamas stronghold. This is now where Hamas is hiding, is located.

ASEEL: <laughs>

NOEL: Does that strike you as a correct assessment? You're laughing.

ASEEL: Yeah. I'm laughing. They are killing children, women. They are targeting hospitals. They are targeting schools. They are killing journalists. The correspondent of Al Jazeera, Wael al-Dahdouh, they killed his wife, his daughters, his sons. And I'm just laughing. They are like, saying they are looking for Hamas. The, the hospitals are not Hamas. The killing of approximately 30,000 people. The majority of them are women and children. Where's Hamas? Where is Hamas between these civilians? And they ordered the residents to relocate to Rafah. Now we are over 1.3 million Palestinians in Rafah. But let me tell you something. Israel is killing people without getting any accountable. They see that the whole world fails Palestinians in Gaza. They left Palestinians in Gaza to be killed, to be wounded, to be targeted…

NOEL: Mm.

ASEEL: … to be bombed. They are not looking for Hamas. They are trying to kill the whole Gazans. This is what I can see. And in the northern part of the Gaza Strip, there is a real starvation. My friend just asked me, Aseel, if you can help me to get any wheat flour. We don't have food. I asked him to go to my bombed house and look for any kind of food, if he can find it, under the rubble. People are now looking for food from under the rubble. They are eating the food of the animals. And we are talking about Hamas? No. Israel is not targeting Hamas. It's targeting the Palestinian people.

NOEL: So what Israel is conducting is an aerial bombardment, but Israeli troops have not entered into Rafah. Are people in Rafah expecting a ground invasion?

ASEEL: Yes, we are expecting…

NOEL: Ok.

ASEEL: …a ground invasion. Yes we are. And if the prospect of a ground invasion into Rafah happened, it would be a catastrophe, as 1.3 million people are already displaced in Rafah. So the people now have no place to go to.

NOEL: And, and is there any way to prepare for this?

ASEEL: What can we do? What? What can we do? What can we do? We stay. We stay in the houses. In the tents. In the streets. In the shelters, waiting to be killed. We don't have a plan F. We made the plan A, plan B, plan C and we have no more plans.

SCORING IN <Tate (e)>

NOEL: Aseel Mousa. She’s a twice-displaced Palestinian journalist in Rafah, where backup plans have been rendered useless, and people only focus on survival.

ASEEL: We don't have the luxury to think of the aftermath. We only think how to survive day by day, we think of how to flee from being killed.

NOEL: Now, there is a method by which the world deals with such catastrophes: and that method is diplomacy. Like Aseel, we wondered where diplomatic efforts stand. And we have answers comin’ up.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

ANTON LA GUARDIA (diplomatic editor of The Economist): My name is Anton La Guardia. I’m the diplomatic editor of *The Economist*, which means I write about foreign policy and national security.

NOEL: All right, so this war has been underway for about four months and one week. What has diplomacy looked like so far in this conflict? How would you characterize it?

ANTON: Well, it's been intense. There's a lot of flying. There's a lot of time spent in planes and convoys and marbled palaces. Antony Blinken has been to the region five times so far since October 7th.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xBTWlPRIZ0)*> U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken: I’m back first and foremost to consult directly with our partners on the joint efforts to bring all of the remaining hostages home.*

ANTON: This particular negotiation, I think, has been difficult because it's working at three levels. One is to mitigate the humanitarian impact of the conflict on Palestinians. The second part of it is to try and get an immediate ceasefire and hostage deal. And the third and hardest element is to try and connect all this to a bigger regional peace deal that tries to, you know, at its most ambitious, end more than a century of conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

NOEL: President Biden has said…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BV9KjseMLHM)*> President Joe Biden: The United States will do everything possible to make it happen.*

NOEL: What does that include? What's on offer?

ANTON: Well, what's on offer is something akin to what happened in November. You remember there was a one-week pause in which, you know, several dozen hostages and prisoners were released.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfskzLJVdxA)*> Ian Hanomansing, CBC: After nearly seven weeks of intense fighting, finally a day of peace. As the temporary truce took hold, a moment so many have been anxiously waiting for.*

ANTON: The idea is to do it again and do it on a much bigger scale. So they're talking about a six week pause in the fighting, renewable. And then, there's obviously bargaining going on about two main things. One is exactly who gets released and what sequence in exchange for what. And, the other thing is, does this lead to a permanent cessation in the fighting or not.

NOEL: And what kind of progress is being made?

ANTON: At the moment, seemingly little. There was hope a week or two ago that things were fluid and moving. Both sides seemed interested in a deal. But we've just heard that after the latest round of talks between intelligence chiefs, including Bill Burns, the director of the CIA, in Cairo, the Israelis have said the delegation is not going back to Cairo. And this has obviously caused much consternation and anger among the families of the hostages, who feel that not enough is being done to get their loved ones home.

NOEL: What accounts for the logjam in negotiations? Is there one particular perspective holding things up?

ANTON: I think it's a number of things. The hardest point is that Hamas wants a full cessation of violence and a full Israeli withdrawal. Israel wants a temporary cessation of the fighting and the ability to keep fighting until total victory, as the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, puts it. So, Hamas is not going to release its hostages if it thinks Israelis are going to come back at them. And Israel says we have to finish this fight so that Hamas is destroyed. So that's, I think, the biggest problem.

NOEL: We're seeing reports that President Biden is growing very frustrated.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pptCmwRS1Mw)*> Reporter: There was some reporting this morning that President Biden told some campaign donors that prime minister Netanyahu, quote, “has been a pain in my ass lately” or, quote, “he's been killing me lately”…*

NOEL: What's your sense of where Joe Biden is right now? Both the pressure he's under and the ways in which his mind may have changed or be changing as this thing continues, this conflict.

ANTON: Well, I don't sit in the White House. But the one thing that Joe Biden has never done is put restrictions on the weapons that he's prepared to send Israel. At the same time, he has wanted greater restraint in the way Israel conducts its operations, has done a lot to try and get more humanitarian aid in, to try and convince Israelis to think about the civilian population. This comes in part from America's own experience of counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan…

NOEL: Hm!

ANTON: …where, you know, America learned the hard way that sheer military power is not enough. You need a political dimension. And he's tried hard to get the Israelis to think about the day after. The trouble is that the day after he sees and that Netanyahu sees are very different. Joe Biden wants a path that ultimately leads to the Palestinian state living side by side with Israel.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BV9KjseMLHM)*> President Joe Biden: …with the Israeli security guaranteed and Palestinian aspirations for their own state fulfilled, I say this as a long, lifelong supporter of Israel, that’s the only path that guarantees Israel’s security for the long term.*

ANTON: Bibi Netanyahu will hear nothing of it because he says a Palestinian state will merely create another terrorist state on our borders, this time on the West Bank.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPRfQPYl1TY)*> Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (through translator): In any future arrangement, Israel needs security control over all territory west of the Jordan. I tell this truth to our American friends. The prime minister needs to be capable of saying no to our friends, saying no when necessary and saying yes when possible.*

ANTON: So, they disagree fundamentally about where they want to go, although they're still more or less in lockstep on the current aims of the war. But even here, you're seeing some parting of the ways. So, for example, the Americans say the aim is to ensure Hamas can never do October the 7th again, which is not quite the same as what Bibi Netanyahu says, which is total victory in the destruction of Hamas. And I think that implies a realization on the American side that something will remain of Hamas. Even as a political ideal, as a religious movement, you're not going to be able to eradicate that. Netanyahu seems to want a much more maximalist aim. And then there are the kind of repercussions for America's position in the Middle East. So you're seeing an escalating and worsening second front with the so-called Axis of Resistance. These are the Iranian groups, sponsored by Iran in Lebanon and Iraq and Syria and Yemen. And where America has now taken, you know, three fatalities, under attack, has retaliated. And there is, you know, a worry that the more this goes on, the worse it will get and the harder it will be to bottle up again.

NOEL: Hm.

ANTON: So, for all those reasons, you're seeing tension between the two leaders. And one of the things that really seems to have irked Netanyahu is a move to impose sanctions on a small number of settlers deemed violent in the West Bank.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQpyIkq3Sqc)*> Hoda Kotb: Four settlers, facing financial sanctions and visa bans from the U.S.*

ANTON: Which is really a sort of warning shot, is going after not Netanyahu himself, but after his right-wing coalition. And to some extent after Netanyahu's base among settlers. And this is a move that's been followed by Europeans. France took similar measures. Britain has done the same. And I think there's a worry that this is going to start to exert real pressure on the settler movement, or certainly the more extreme fringe of it.

NOEL: Benjamin Netanyahu is also under pressure from many sides. And at the moment he's speaking, he's warning, of a ground invasion in Rafah. We talked to a journalist there earlier, and she says people there are expecting that. Is that changing diplomatic efforts at all?

ANTON: I think it’s adding urgency to the effort…

NOEL: Mm.

ANTON: …to try and wind down the war, if not stop it and then try to get into a diplomatic process that leads to a wider settlement. But, you know, Netanyahu has a consideration. The Israeli public has moved to the right. For all the demonstrations that you're seeing on the streets of Israel, it is not a demand for peace now, the kind that was seen after the Lebanon War in 1982. The belief that peace with Palestinians is possible has been greatly eroded since the Oslo Accords of ‘93 for a number of reasons, not least of which is the Second Intifada of the 2000s and now October the 7th. So, though there's urgency to get there, I think it is just much harder to do it. And there's also mistrust on the Palestinian side of the Israelis. The weakness and discrediting of Abu Mazen. This is Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader in the West Bank, who's now in the 18th and 19th year of what is supposed to be a four year term. And there's, of course, the tragedy of what's happening in Gaza itself.

NOEL: Is anyone at this point speaking with any level of specificity about what comes after this war? Is anyone talking about how Gaza is rebuilt and who rebuilds it?

ANTON: Yes, but it is in the middle distance rather than in the, you know, within reach.

NOEL: Mm.

ANTON: Nobody wants to rebuild stuff that’s going to get bombed again. So the Arabs are saying we will do humanitarian help, but we will not do reconstruction until there is a full cessation of this conflict and there is a real path towards a deal that includes a Palestinian state. So the promise is there, but it's not going to be acted upon until we get much greater clarity.

SCORING IN <Lost in the Past>

NOEL: Let me ask you a last very big picture diplomatic question, if I can. Before 10/7, Israel was normalizing relations with neighboring Arab countries. Is there any hope of that resuming at any point in the near future?

ANTON: You would have thought not.

NOEL: Hm.

ANTON: Just because emotions are so fired up at the moment and the, you know, profound lack of trust. But, going around with the Americans, in the Middle East, there is this kind of surprising sense that Saudi Arabia, in particular, the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, really wants to settle this matter. And that, he's willing to do big things. If he gets Israelis to move on Palestinian statehood. And those big things would include, recognition of Israel, peaceful diplomatic relations, but seemingly also some kind of Arab guarantee to Israel to try and offer it reassurance that it will be safe in future. What is included in those security guarantees is unclear, but it seems to be formalizing some of the things that happen: intelligence sharing, military exercises, joint air defenses and so on. But that's kind of, you know, the 10th step. They need to get onto the first step, which is stopping the fighting. No Arab leader can move until the fighting stops and the human misery ends. And then you need to get into a cease fire, and then you need to get to an Israeli commitment for Palestinian statehood.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: That was Anton La Guardia, diplomatic editor of Leading Magazine *The Economist*.

NOEL: Our thanks as well to Maram Humaid of Al Jazeera English.

Today’s episode was produced by Avishay Artsy and edited by Amina Al-Sadi. It was fact-checked by Kim Eggleston and Laura Bullard, and David Herman is our engineer. I’m Noel King. It’s *Today, Explained*.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**