

Gaza and Soweto

Children in Jabalia

Overcrowded shanties line unpaved streets; a newborn baby dies due to lack of adequate health care facilities; racist soldiers charge into a group of youth; schoolchildren are lulled by a third-rate educational curriculum devoid of any truthful reference to their own history and culture; meanwhile, thousands leave home at dawn to work in the colonizers' enterprises.

This is daily fare for Palestinians of the occupied Gaza Strip and Africans living in Soweto, outside Johannesburg, South Africa. Both are victims of settler colonialism's ultimate development. Dispossessed of their land and other means of independent livelihood, they are forced to sell their labor power cheap - to the colonizers. 'Israel' and South African settler colonialism represent a particularly ruthless form of capitalism. Applying racist laws and fascist repression, they escape paying Palestinians and Blacks, respectively, wages that provide a minimal standard of living. With the profits of this super-exploitation, the regimes provide extra welfare to the settler population, increasing its cohesion across class boundaries. This single fact is the main explanation for the abject living conditions and oppression shared by Gazans and Sowetans.

The comparison between Gaza and Soweto was recently made in a report on the Gaza Strip, published by the West Bank Data Base Project, headed by Meron Benvenisti, Israeli researcher and former deputy mayor of Jerusalem. The report called Gaza 'Israel's Soweto' due to its booming population, appalling health conditions, deteriorating economy and increasing dependence on 'Israel'.

NO SPACE TO GROW

The total area of the Gaza Strip is 140 square miles. Of these, 43.6 have been declared 'state lands', i.e., reserved exclusively for use by Israeli Jews. On this one-third of the Strip, there are something over 2,000 Zionist settlers in 18 settlements; some use their settlement only for weekend farming or recreation. In contrast, 525,000 Palestinians live in the remaining 96.4 square miles. Their population density is 5,440 persons per square mile, one of the highest in the world.

The majority of Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip today are refugees from the 1948 occupation of Palestine; 69% of them live in eight refugee camps. Israeli occupation policy bears direct responsibility for inhuman overcrowding. Despite population growth, the camps cannot be expanded, and residents are forbidden to enlarge or even renovate their houses. Some have been fined for plastering a wall or changing a window. 'Illegal' additions are simply demolished, as happened with 35 shel-

ters in Shatti camp in 1983. This is not merely application of zoning laws, but a deliberate part of the occupation policy designed to control the population. The problem is compounded by the Zionists' practice of demolishing the houses of families of 'suspects'. In one week of the spring of 1983, six houses were bulldozed, leaving 55 people homeless because members of the family were wanted or imprisoned (but not tried).

The result of all this is 10-20 persons living in small corrugated iron or mud huts built with the help of the UN in the early fifties, for families less than half their present size. In the largest camp, Jabalia, there is an average of six persons per room.

REFUGEES IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY

Like Gaza Palestinians, and most Black South Africans, the people of Soweto are refugees in their own country. Soweto grew into an overcrowded ghetto with a population of one and a half million as a direct result of apartheid. In the forties and fifties, Blacks were forced out of Johannesburg and whole neighborhoods razed to the ground, pushing thousands into Soweto. Under Pretoria's Bantustan policy, Black South Africans have no permanent residence rights outside their assigned 'tribal homeland'. Thus, Sowetans rent their houses from the government. Recently, in one of its fake 'reform' gestures, the Botha government offered Sowetans 99-year leases on their houses, but only a handful had enough money to pay for this.

Also in accordance with apartheid, residents must carry a pass showing they have the right to be in Soweto, or travel to work in Johannesburg. For others, special permission is needed to enter Soweto, just as the Israeli occupation authorities do their best to isolate the Gaza Strip, unless it comes to Gazans doing menial work in 'Israel'.

An average of 14 persons live in the four-room matchboxes that crowd Soweto's streets. Only one out of every five houses has electricity. Most do not have an indoor toilet. The most extreme crowding is found in the hostels for migrant workers who leave their families in the Bantustans, where there is no work, for eleven months a year to work in Johannesburg where they are for-

