

Local advocates step up efforts to help Americans leave Gaza as conditions worsen

By **John Hilliard** Globe Staff, Updated October 26, 2023, 11:59 a.m.



Ramona Okumura, 71, of Seattle, is a volunteer with the Palestinian Children's Relief Fund, and was working in Gaza to help create prosthetics for children when war broke out between Israel and Hamas. PALESTINIAN CHILDREN'S RELIEF FUND

With the Israel-Hamas war escalating, local advocates for American citizens trapped in southern Gaza are expanding efforts to get them out as humanitarian conditions deteriorate.

The Americans families from Medway and Plymouth, aid workers staying in a UN shelter, and the head of a hospital badly damaged by an explosion. Their frustration and worries are growing as they await word from the US State Department on when they can finally cross the border from Gaza into Egypt.

For now, they are stranded in the besieged enclave as Israeli bombs fall nearby. Their advocates have been buttonholing members of Congress and US government officials to help them flee to safety.

Advocates and Americans in Gaza who spoke to the Globe in interviews have each described US citizens being urged by the State Department to head to the Rafah border crossing in southern Gaza in order to enter Egypt. But each time — and despite hours of waiting at the border — they haven't been allowed to cross.

Among them is Ramona Okumura, who has dedicated her life to designing and building prosthetic limbs for children. She volunteered as part of a relief program in Gaza the day Hamas attacked Israel, said her niece, Leah Okumura of Arlington.

“My aunt, who’s an aid worker who went there simply to help children, could be killed by a bomb that I paid for,” said Leah Okumura, who teaches biology at Wellesley College. “And that’s horrifying to me.”

Also in Gaza is Suhila Tarazi, the director of Ahli Arab Hospital since the 1980s. A blast last week at the medical facility killed hundreds, and Tarazi, a US citizen with family in South Carolina, has been helping with the clean-up, according to the Rev. Nicholas Porter, the founding director of Jerusalem Peacebuilders in Brattleboro, Vt.

Porter, who has known Tarazi for decades, said his organization — which works to foster peace between Israelis and Palestinians — has been trying to bring Tarazi to the US since the attack. Her home was destroyed, and she is now staying with friends in southern Gaza.

“She’s a person who has dedicated her whole life to caring and healing,” Porter said. “The patients, the staff — they are her family.”

An estimated 500 to 600 Americans are trapped in Gaza nearly three weeks after a rampage by Hamas militants killed more than 1,400 Israelis. Since Israel's forces responded with airstrikes, more than 5,700 have died in Gaza, according to The Associated Press, citing officials in Hamas-controlled Gaza.

“There's nowhere to stay that's safe, whether it's from Israeli bombs that are falling all around them that are paid for by US tax dollars, or by misfired rockets from grounds in Gaza itself,” Okumura said in a phone interview. “It's terrifying to think that she's still there, still waiting, and the United States has not gotten her out of there.”

Her aunt, a native of Honolulu, was an instructor on prosthetics at the University of Washington in Seattle for nearly three decades, and also worked as a prosthetics clinician who built artificial limbs, before she retired in 2017.

Ramona Okumura's educational work also led to an appearance on an [early 1990s episode of “Bill Nye The Science Guy.”](#) On the show, she explained to children how prosthetics are designed and operated.

“It's sort of like taking the applications of engineering and helping someone to get better... we can get someone back to playing on the playground,” Ramona Okumura said on the program.

She has frequently traveled to Gaza to help design limbs for children, and train local medical technicians how to provide artificial limbs using the materials available in the territory, according to her family. For the past several years, she has volunteered with Palestinian Children's Relief Fund, which provides medical care, including in Gaza and the West Bank, according to the organization.

When the war broke out, Okumura had been working at Gaza's Hamad Rehabilitation Hospital, her niece said.

Ramona Okumura, in a message shared by her niece Tuesday, said she is with workers from non-governmental organizations, and they are trying to make due with limited water,

and a single toilet for 45 people.

The sound of bombs and missiles are heard day and night, she said. The concussions, she said, can be felt through the ground.

She called for a cease-fire to prevent the deaths of civilians in Gaza, particularly children.

“At face value, most Americans would be uncomfortable in my situation,” Ramona Okumura said in the message. “I hope Americans are equally uncomfortable knowing that I am safer in my location than the 100 children killed each day, and many more wounded.”

At the hospital, Tarazi is working to clean up the site while she waits to be evacuated, she said in a text message shared with the Globe.

The non-profit group had been raising money for a radiology treatment center for the hospital when it was damaged by the explosion, according to Porter.

Hundreds of people reportedly were sheltering in the hospital’s parking lot when it was struck. Hamas blamed Israel for the attack. American officials said a Palestinian rocket caused the explosion, [according to The New York Times](#).

In her message, Tarazi said the situation in Gaza is extremely dangerous.

“The stress of enduring this is more than I can say but each day I find my way to the Ahli Arab Hospital to direct its care of patients and the continued clean up,” Tarazi said.

“Everywhere is death and destruction. We are praying for the Rafah Crossing to be opened, for our American Government to evacuate us.”

A State Department spokesperson declined to speak about specific cases of Americans inside Gaza, and repeated earlier comments that the United States was working with Egypt and Israel to allow US citizens and their family members to leave.

“We are providing the best information we can about shifting conditions to allow US citizens to make their own decisions regarding their safety and security in an incredibly

difficult and fluid situation,” the statement said.

Americans in Gaza have described intensifying airstrikes near their shelters and concerns for their safety, as well as for civilians in Gaza. They have also described a worsening humanitarian crisis, with fuel, food, and water in short supply.

Two Massachusetts families have said they have repeatedly tried to cross into Egypt at Gaza’s Rafah border crossing, at the urging of the State Department. Egyptian border guards have not allowed them to pass, including when aid trucks were allowed into Gaza beginning over the weekend.

Sanaa Shafai and Hazem Shafai of Plymouth, who are in southern Gaza with their daughters, Seera, 13, Yomna, 10, and son, Jasser, 2, are staying in a shelter in Rafah while they wait for permission to cross into Egypt, [Hani Shafai, Hazem’s brother, said in a recent interview](#). As they wait, they worry for their children.

“They are really beginning to see the damage to their kids,” Shafai said. “It is very difficult.”

Medway family Abood Okal and Wafaa Abuzayda, with their 1-year-old son, Yousef Okal, listened to the road of airstrikes near the home they are staying in near the Egyptian border, Okal said in an [audio message shared with the Globe](#). They are staying in a private home, which shakes due to the bombings, he said.

“Time is of the essence [to leave], because of the ground invasion [by Israel], which is supposed to happen any minute now,” Okal said. “And we cannot even think of the destruction that would bring upon us.”

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