ISRAEL-GAZA CONFLICT

MARCO CHOWN OVED TORONTO STAR

One of about 50 stranded workers from Gaza who have been stuck on the Israeli side of the border since the Hamas attack and Israel's military retaliation.

Closed crossing leaves families divided

GAZA FROM A1

Then they were brought to the West Bank, where they would be safe, they were told, from any vigilante attacks by angry Israelis.

"I was handcuffed and shackled," said Oday Mousa, 32, a construction worker from Deir El-Balah, a refugee camp in central Gaza. "They took my work permit, my ID and my phone."

After being processed, Mousa said, he was taken on a bus to Ramallah, where he was kept in jail with other Gazan workers for a week before being released. But without papers, he cannot travel back to Israel, much less across the battle lines forming as Israel masses tanks and an estimated 300,000 troops in the area around Gaza in preparation for an invasion.

"I'm worried about my parents," Mousa told the Star outside a banquet hall in Al-Ram, a Palestinian village in the West Bank near Jerusalem. "My father has shrapnel from an explosion in his knee, and they don't have the materials they need to operate on him.

"The situation is very bad," he said. "I want to be with my children. I want to be with my father. But I cannot, because the crossing is closed."

The Israel Border Police did not respond to a request for comment before deadline.

Tucked down a back alley lined with piles of freshly cut lumber and terra cotta roofing tiles, the banquet hall offered up by a local family has become an unhappy home for dozens of Gazan workers who want nothing more than to be reunited with their families in one of the most dangerous places on the planet. Inside, donated fruit browns on large platters. Blue foam mattresses form lines, tucked under tables and chairs stacked up against a wall. Men, some as old as 60, trade newly purchased phones back and forth in an attempt to get ahold of their families back home.

It's a task complicated by the fact that Gaza has been without electricity for more than a week. People pay 50 Israeli shekels (about $17) for a charge of their phone from a car battery.

Israel has dropped more than 6,000 bombs on Gaza over the past week, levelling entire blocks in parts of Gaza City and the north. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) say they target Hamas leadership and infrastructure, but these are often found in dense urban areas, where the bombing has killed an estimated 2,750 civilians. Meanwhile, more than 1,400 Israelis have been killed, the vast majority civilians massacred in the initial Hamas assault.

Israel has also confirmed at least 199 hostages have been taken to Gaza by Hamas.

On Friday, the IDF gave Gazans 24 hours to evacuate the northern third of their territory, an area that houses more than a million people, setting off a flood of panicked people fleeing south.

One convoy of fleeing Gazans came under attack Friday, with locals accusing the IDF of bombing the very people who were complying with its order to leave. The IDF denied responsibility for the attack, which struck a flatbed truck carrying scores of people, including women and children. A gruesome video of the immediate aftermath of the attack has been circulating online.

The UN has warned that many sick and injured people in Gaza's hospitals are not fit to be transported and, on Monday, said water had run out at its shelters, where hundreds of thousands have sought refuge. Meanwhile, doctors at the territory's largest hospital are struggling to care for patients they fear will die once generators run out of fuel.

Mousa's father, Jihad, was walking to work on Oct. 8, just 24 hours after the attack, when a bomb stuck a nearby building, he said. Jihad was knocked off his feet and only noticed afterward that he had been struck in the knee. At the hospital, the 56-year-old sat for hours without care because so many others we more seriously injured. When he was finally seen, an X-ray was taken, but he was told they could not operate because they did not have the pins needed to hold the bones together. Now Mousa's parents have moved in with his wife and children in Deir El-Balah, in a building whose population has swelled from 20 to more than 100 with so many fleeing the bombs.

"A lot of people are coming south," he said. "They don't know where to go."

Another of the men, who goes by Abu Ahed, but who said he did not want to have his real name published for fear of retribution from Israeli officials, said his family had to move three times to avoid the bombs.

Asked if he would risk his life to be with his family, he didn't hesitate.

"A war is a war. But I want to be with my family. At least that way, if we are killed, we are killed together."

Palestinians take cover behind garbage bins during clashes with Israeli forces at the northern entrance of Ramallah city, near the Beit El Israeli settlement, in the occupied West Bank on Monday.

JAAFAR ASHTIYEH AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Liberals 'unequivocal in position on terror'

First dual Israeli-Canadian cabinet minister defends federal government's Mideast approach

TONDA MACCHARLES
OTTAWA BUREAU CHIEF

OTTAWA York Centre MP Ya'ara Saks is the first dual Israeli-Canadian citizen in federal cabinet, a Jewish mother of two teenage girls and Canada's minister of mental health at a time of wrenching images and with decisions to be made about this country's response in the Middle East.

In an interview with the Star, Saks described the Trudeau government as "unequivocal" in the fight against terrorism, and defended Ottawa's balanced approach.

Saks revealed she is also grieving a personal loss after the Oct. 7 sweeping Hamas attacks that killed more than 1,300 people including at least five Canadians, and captured nearly 200 hostages now held in Gaza.

Saks would not go into more detail about what she said was "a nightmare," saying only that her closest and extended family is in Israel, "so when I woke up Saturday morning, it was news from my family," she said. "We are, like many families, grieving."

Each day since the attacks, Saks said, "the horror of understanding just the sheer numbers and how brutal this terrorist attack was on Israel has been a lot to process, frankly."

In Canada's Jewish community, there are "barely one to two degrees of separation" with friends, family and extended relations in Israel, Saks said as she described a challenging week for MPs responding to the "trauma and fear" constituents are feeling, the sense of insecurity in the face of demonstrations "glorifying the attacks," and to demands for help abroad.

More than 7,000 Canadians have registered with the Canadian embassy in Israel, and nearly 500 more are in the West Bank and Gaza. More than 1,300 who couldn't get out on sporadic commercial flights from Israel have since left on Canadian Forces military flights to Athens.

A busload of Canadians has left from the West Bank to Jordan. And more than 150 Canadians who've asked Ottawa for help to leave Gaza have little option but to await any opening at the southern border with Egypt, as the Israel Defence Forces bombard the Hamas-controlled territory ahead of a planned ground assault.

"The Jewish community and Israelis here are deeply, deeply impacted by the horror of the attacks. But I would also acknowledge that there are those from the Muslim and Palestinian communities who are also worried about their loved ones right now," said Saks.

"Canada is a place where we have all chosen to make home. And in moments like this, it's really important as a government that we are unified in addressing both the grieving and the fear that many are feeling of the safety of loved ones in the region."

Saks believes the Trudeau government has struck the right balance, saying it has been "unequivocally clear in our position on terror," while working to ensure the safety of civilians.

She said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has been clear that "antisemitism is not a problem for the Jewish community to confront alone. In the wake of those who glorify and celebrate these horrific acts of terror, we've been unequivocally clear that such hate has no place in Canada."

Still, Saks, a rookie minister for mental health and addictions since July, said in the interview with the Star she thinks that amid the current tensions, the federal government has "held very firm on a vision of peace in the region and a two-state solution," and said, "we have to hang on to that even in moments of deep challenge, like right now."

Minister of Mental Health and Addictions Ya'ara Saks said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has been clear that "antisemitism is not a problem for the Jewish community to confront alone."