**There’s no safe place**

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First Hind Rajab went missing, then her rescuers. But missing isn’t the right word. Hind is missed. So are the people who tried to save her. So much depends on using the right words now. On being precise.

Hind didn’t go missing. Her rescuers didn’t go missing. Hind was trying to escape. Her rescuers were trying to save her.

But you can’t escape from a tank in a small black Kia. Not a tank filled with soldiers who’d fire on a small black Kia, driving away from them. Not a tank armed with the latest explosive shells provided on an emergency order by the US government. Not a tank that would shoot at a frightened young girl.

Six-year-old girls who like to dress up as princesses in pink gowns don’t simply go missing in Gaza City these days. They don’t just disappear. They are disappeared.

Hind Rajab was in her own city when the invaders in tanks came. What was left of it. By late January, 60 percent of the homes in Gaza City had already been destroyed by Israeli missiles and bombs. Hind’s own kindergarten, which she’d recently graduated from had been blown up, as had so many other schools, places of learning, places of shelter and places of safety in Gaza City. (78 percent of school buildings in Gaza have been directly hit or damaged amid Israel’s incessant bombing, according to a new report by Relief.net. The 162 school buildings directly hit served more than 175,000 kids.)

But to be a child in Gaza City now is to be a target. There are no safe streets, no sanctuaries. The places where you once felt most at home are now the most likely to be bombed. There are no escape routes. Every corner you turn might put you face-to-face with a tank or in the laser-sights of a sniper or under a Hermes drone.

Hind was missed, but she wasn’t missing. Hind was hiding. Hiding in a car shredded by shrapnel and bullets. Hiding in a car with dead and dying relatives: her aunt, her uncle, three of her cousins. Hiding in a car bleeding from wounds to her back, her hands and her foot. Hiding with her 15-year-old cousin Layan Hamadeh, who was also hurt, bleeding and terrified.

Layan had grabbed her dead father’s phone and called the Red Crescent Society. She begged them to come rescue her and Hind. “They are shooting at us,” Layan pleaded. “The tank is right next to me. We’re in the car, the tank is right next to us.” Then there was the sound of gunfire and the line went silent. The dispatcher asked, “Hello? Hello?” There was no answer. The connection had cut out.

The Red Crescent operator called back. Hind answered. She told them Layan had been shot. She told them everyone else in the car was now dead. She stayed on the line for three hours. The dispatcher read her lines from the Koran to calm her.

“I’m so scared,” Hind said. “Please come, come take me. You will come and take me?”

Can you imagine? Can you imagine your daughter picking up the phone from the dead hands of her cousin, who’d been shot to death only seconds before right in front of her?

The dispatchers told Hind to keep hiding in the car. They told her that an ambulance was coming. They told her that she would soon be safe. Hind had been able to tell Rana Al-Faqueh, the PRCS’s response coordinator, where she was: near the Fares petrol station in the Tel al-Hawa neighborhood. Her own neighborhood. She told them the entire neighborhood seemed to be under siege by the Israelis.

It was approaching 6 in the evening. The street was now in shadows. It had been three hours since she and her family had been shot. Three hours in the car with the bodies of her dead relatives. Three hours under fire with darkness closing in.

“I’m afraid of the dark,” Hind told Rana. “Is there gunfire around you?” Rana asked. “Yes,” Hind said. “Come get me.” Then the line went dead again. This time for good.

An ambulance had been sent, but it never arrived. Her rescuers came for her, selflessly entered the zone of fire, but never reached her. Hind’s mother, Wissam Hamada, had gone to the hospital anxiously expecting her daughter any minute, but she never showed up. Before the ambulance was dispatched, the Red Crescent Society told the Gaza Health Ministry and the IDF about Hind’s call. They told them she was a frightened, wounded six-year-old girl in a black Kia that had been mangled by tank fire. They told them where she was and that an ambulance was coming. They asked that the ambulance be given safe passage to Hind.

After they’d coordinated a plan for her rescue, the RCS dispatched an ambulance crewed by two paramedics: Ahmed al-Madhoon and Youssef Zeino. As Ahmed and Youssef approached the Tel al-Hawa area, they reported to the Red Crescent dispatchers that the IDF was targeting them, that snipers had pointed lasers at the ambulance. Then there was the sound of gunfire and an explosion. The line went silent.

A frantic search began for Hind, Ahmed and Youseff. But no one could enter the Tel al-Hawa neighborhood. No Palestinians, at least. Not even to find a little girl. Not even after the tapes of the harrowing calls for help by Layan and Hind had been made public. The IDF had sealed it off.

When CNN reporters, whose deferential posture toward the Israeli regime has recently been detailed by the Guardian, contacted the IDF about Hind and the two paramedics, giving them the coordinates of the car, the Israelis said they were “unfamiliar with the incident described.” Four days later, CNN inquired again about the fate of Hind, Ahmed and Youseff and the IDF replied they were “still looking into it.” The Israelis didn’t look too deeply into ‘the incident’. The evidence was right before them, done by their own hands, likely captured on footage from their own soldiers, tracked by their own drones.

It would be 12 days before the Israelis withdrew from Tel al-Hawa; 12 days before anyone reached Hind, whose body had been left by the Israelis to decompose in the black Kia next to Layan and Layan’s father and mother and her three siblings (also children); 12 days before anyone discovered what happened to the ambulance sent to rescue her; 12 days before anyone found Ahmed and Youssef, left where they had been shot.

The headlines in the corporate press said Hind’s body had been “found.” But found isn’t the right word. Hind wasn’t missing. Her rescuers knew where she was and were killed because they almost reached her. The Israelis knew where she was, right where they’d killed her and her family. The media made the double massacre sound like a mystery. But there was nothing mysterious about it. By late January, the killing of Hind and her family and the Israeli attack on a Palestinian ambulance had become routine. Since October, at least 146 ambulances have been targeted by the IDF and more than 309 medical workers killed.

Who will rescue the rescuers? The massacre on that street in Tel al-Hawa took place three days after Israel had been put on notice by the International Court of Justice that it needed to stop committing acts of genocide, stop killing civilians, stop killing children and health care workers – a ruling that Israel has not just ignored but openly defied. Instead, Israel blames the victims of its atrocities.

Tel al-Hawa was a closed military zone, the IDF says. Any Palestinians moving on the streets were legitimate targets, the IDF says. The rules of engagement were those of the US troops at My Lai: shoot anything that moves. Even young girls and the paramedics who rushed to treat their wounds.

The black Kia, its windows blown out, the body of the car gashed by shrapnel and riven with bullet holes, was found by Hind’s relatives exactly where Layan and Hind had said it was: right next to the gas station. It was found where it had come under fire from an Israeli tank. It was found near the PRC ambulance that had been sent to rescue Hind, itself shredded by Israeli tank shells and gunfire.

Was Hind alive to see the ambulance approach? Did she think she was finally going to be brought to safety? Did she watch her rescuers come under fire? Did she witness Ahmed and Youssef be killed by the IDF? Was she still alive, alone, as the sky drew dark, left in the chill of the night, knowing now no one was coming to save her?

Excerpted: ‘A Cry in the Darkness: “Please Come, Come Take Me”’.

Courtesy: Counterpunch.org