

“Our people are accustomed to waiting”

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“Without laws, there is neither justice nor freedom, and we all know that without freedom and justice, it is difficult to have peace. Words give way to weapons.”

With this brief reflection, Filippo Bianchetti opened the meeting organised by the Varese Committee for Palestine, on the situation in Gaza.

Bianchetti continued, “The San Siro Hill in Milan, where, today, people go running with their dogs, grew from the remains of the bombing raids in 1945; and it is from about that time that, in Palestine, particularly in Gaza, the remains have been accumulating. This evening, we hope to be able to honour our history, by listening to the history of others.”

And once more, the generosity and participation of Varese have been surprising. Over one hundred people came to listen to Mohamed Al-Halabi, who is responsible for Gaza’s external relations. “Our people are accustomed to waiting. There is nothing else we can do.” The situation is terrible, dramatic, at the limit of improbability. In fact, it is a large, open-air prison, the confines of which were outlined by Flavio Ibba, who took a few minutes to explain what life is like in Gaza. Halabi has worked for the council for seven years, and, in fact, cannot leave Gaza. It is impossible for him to obtain an exit visa.

“Only 200m away, everything is different. In Gaza, there is a shortage of everything. After the war, so much aid was promised, but then nothing more happened. The conflict could have been resolved in twenty minutes, because Israel knew where to strike; but, instead, all hell was let loose, 1400 people were killed, including 332 children. They destroyed ten schools and more than four thousand houses. What is

most difficult to accept is that nothing seems ever to go well in Israel. They used to say that the problem in the peace process was Arafat, then that we should have free elections. Hamas won with an electoral law sought by the West, who now complain because Abu Mazen is too weak. There's always an excuse not to resolve the problems. But we know how to wait. We're going to stay in Gaza, and we're going to continue to make plans and to educate our children for a different future."

Mohamed's words are calm and decisive. He has an energy that he transmits to a silent hall, where the rhythm of the translations does nothing to dampen the emotion of what he is talking about.

Three politicians accepted the organisers' invitation and were present until the end of the meeting. They were the regional councillors, Raffaele Cattaneo and Mario Agostinelli, and the town councillor, Alessandro Alfieri.

They were asked a question about what can be done here in Varese, in Lombardy. What role can the institutions take?

Cattaneo thinks there are three possibilities. "The first is to understand each other better, and occasions like this meeting are important. The second is to intensify what the Region is already doing, supporting the NGOs in cooperation projects. The third is to put political pressure on international organisations to work for a peace process that acknowledges the right of all people to have their own state."

According to Agostinelli, "The first answer is today's extraordinary participation. In Varese, there is a demand for justice, and this is good. We, in the region, were able to support the march in December, and similar initiatives, and to put pressure on the government to listen to the people working for peace. This apartheid must be broken, and it's unacceptable that we should only wait. And it's just as unacceptable for Lombardy to sell weapons to areas in the world that are tormented by war. We need to rebuild the relationship with our leaders, to make them hear our voice."

According to Alfieri, "We need to shake people's consciences, because, paradoxically, one result of globalisation is that we are becoming accustomed to seeing images of death, and so, we tolerate them. There are some great projects, but giving money to the NGOs is not enough, the local communities must be involved, they must take part in the solidarity initiatives. And together with these, we need to give another impulse to the economy, because it is only then that Gaza can return to a normal, free life.

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