

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY

WEST BANK BARRIER BRINGS FEAR AND HEALTH COMPLICATIONS FOR PREGNANT WOMEN

Women in the northern West Bank village of Azzun 'Atma reside only a few kilometres from three hospitals. Still they live in fear that, when it is time to give birth, they won't be able to get there. In between this village of 1,750 and medical care is an electric gate, manned by Israeli soldiers, that is closed at night. Even daytime crossings are less than certain.

Six months ago, Benan Yusef went into labour with her second child just before dawn. Her husband wasn't there; he spends nights in Israel where he works in construction. Instead, she called his family, and together Yusef and her relatives set out to the hospital in nearby Qalqilya. When they arrived at the gate, the soldiers appeared to be preparing for its usual opening at 5 a.m. They had come down from the guard tower and lifted the metal spikes that are placed across the road at night. But no amount of persuasion could convince the soldiers to let the 28-year-old woman pass. "I was very afraid that the baby would die. It was so cold," she remembers.

The petite woman with a moon-shaped face lay down in the back seat, waiting for the gate to open at its normal time. She felt the baby pressing down, but her mother-in-law told her to hold on, and tried to cover her legs. It was no use. Just as the car passed the gate, Yusef told the driver to pull over, and bright-eyed Aya was delivered in the dark by her mother-in-law. "The soldiers heard the sound of her voice," she recalls. "We had nothing to wrap her in, and so I put her in my jacket. But the water was all under me."

Azzun 'Atma has a visiting doctor who sees patients twice a week in a nurse-staffed clinic. But if residents have more than a cold or minor illness on the days he is not there, they must travel to Qalqilya for care. The trip to Qalqilya requires passing through a military gate, which is part of the 723-kilometre-long complex of cement walls, barbed wire, patrol roads and guard towers that Israel is constructing throughout the West Bank. The barrier is needed for security reasons, Israel says, but its route was declared illegal in an advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice at The Hague in 2004.

The residents of Azzun 'Atma are among some 10,000 Palestinians who live in five closed military areas created by the barrier in the northern occupied West Bank, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Only those with an address in Azzun 'Atma, a special permit or military coordination are allowed to enter the village.

To avoid having to pass the gate in an emergency, half of the village's pregnant women leave Azzun 'Atma before their due date. Residents say that even a local midwife wouldn't be able to help if the baby were breached or there were other complications. The restrictions on movement affect dozens of women. Between January and early June 2007, 33 babies were born to mothers from Azzun 'Atma. Twenty were delivered outside the enclave; of the home deliveries, none was attended by a trained midwife or doctor. In 2008, 24 babies were born.

Even if a baby is born healthy in the village, complications can set in later. Yusef suffered pain and infection after giving birth in the backseat of her in-laws car. While a traditional birth attendant in the next village checked her and cut her baby's umbilical cord, the new mother had been injured. Days later, it became a serious infection that required surgery. For nearly five years, the women of Azzun 'Atma have had to negotiate this barrier to proper health. Even routine trips have become difficult. A preliminary survey carried out by OCHA and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), has shown that just over 3 per cent of residents in closed areas, such as Azzun 'Atma, are leaving their homes and moving to other locales due to hardship.

UNICEF is working with the Ministry of Health to target children and mothers in these hard-to-reach areas, providing basic vaccines and vitamin supplements, as well as improving child health monitoring. Still, the women wish for a day when the closure on their village will be eased. "They have to open the gate [at night], even if it is only for emergency cases," says Yusef.