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The dogs (and cats) of war: The Gazan charity helping animals on the frontline

Elizabeth Mearns

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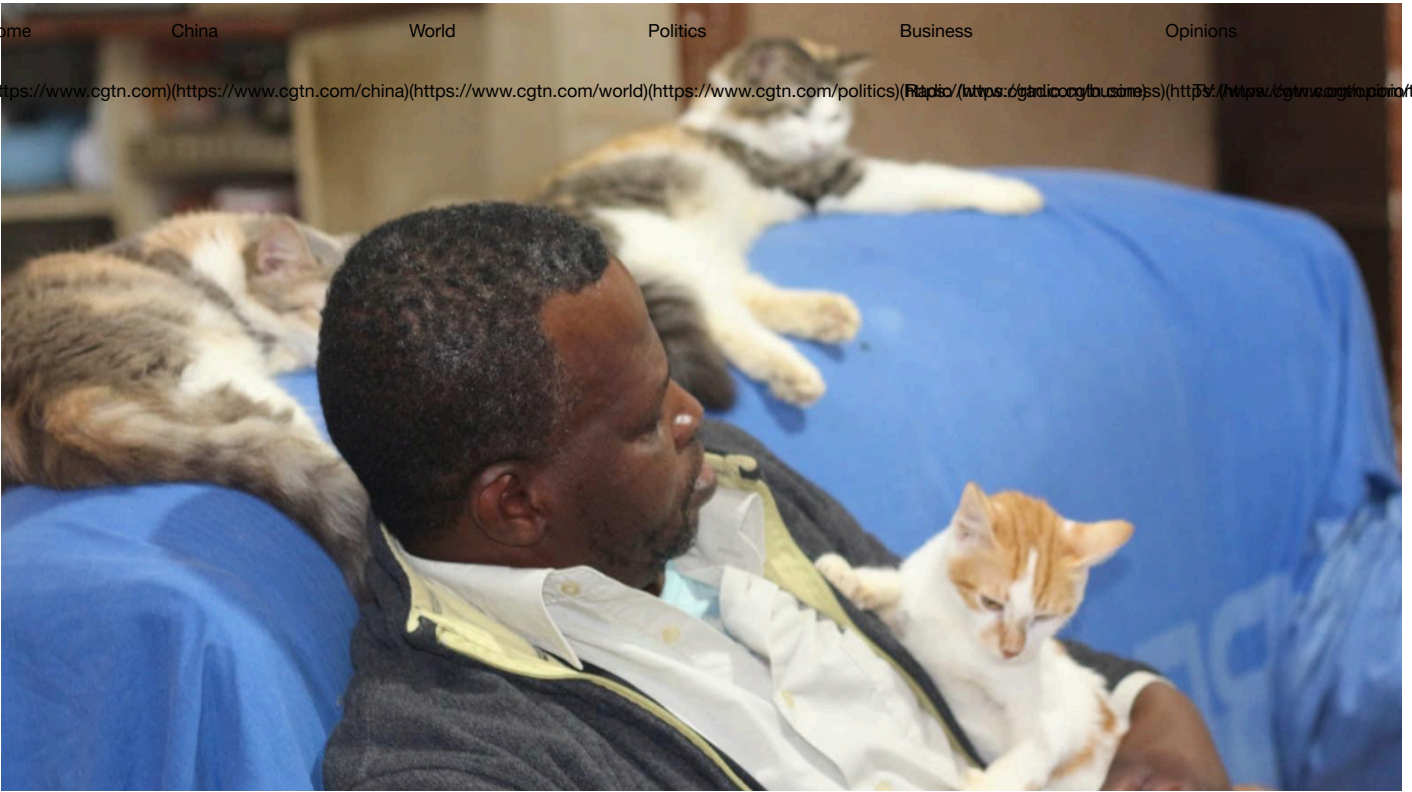
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In times of armed conflict, the focus is understandably on the danger to humans, and particularly civilians. But what about the animals in a war zone?

The Sulala Society for Animal Care – roughly translated, *sulala* means 'animals' in Arabic – is the only Gazan organization established to help stray animals in the Gaza Strip. It was founded by Saeed Al Err, who was born and grew up in Gaza.

An animal lover since childhood, for decades he has fed, housed and helped stray and wounded animals. In 2000, he got together with a couple of friends and registered Sulala to change the lives of animals in Gaza.



Saeed in his home before the war. /Sulala Society for Animal Care

In the last five years, he has built a dog shelter the size of a football field with a covered area for the dogs to sleep and a big open area where they can run around. The shelter houses around 400 dogs. Alongside this, he secured funding to rent apartments that he could use as cat shelters. Each houses a volunteer and about 30-40 cats – and he also lives with around the same number of cats in his home.

In 2019, Annelies Keuleers, an Arabic-language student living in Belgium, came across the Sulala Instagram account.

"I thought the work he was doing was amazing," Keuleers tells CGTN – but she had an idea to help. She noticed he was posting in Arabic and using Google Translate for English, and the social posts weren't always making sense. She offered to help with Sulala's social media – and this was just the start.

"I've also become involved with communication and reporting for our donor organization Animals Australia," Keuleers explains. "I write a monthly report and send them stories about the animals that we rescued that month."



Happier times before the war. /Sulala Society for Animal Care



A volunteer before the war. /Sulala Society for Animal Care

Other volunteers help with IT, financial reports, bookkeeping and of course care for the animals themselves. Keuleers says the Gaza shelters are badly needed.

"The rehoming of animals in Gaza is quite difficult," she says. "A lot of people have cats in their house, while dogs are generally not allowed inside the house."

This culture has led to a lot of stray dogs in the streets – but, thanks to Sulala, that was beginning to change. The organization recently started to offer 'awareness sessions' – school visits to explain the importance of helping and looking after animals. As Keuleers says, "In an ideal world, we would have more adoptions each month,"

A sudden conflict

But the world is not ideal, and it has veered much further from it since October 7. On that day, Hamas forces entered Israel, killing more than 1,400 people and taking more than 200 hostage. Keuleers learned about it from her colleague and friend in Gaza.

"I woke up to a text from Saeed saying, 'Good morning. A war has started very suddenly,'" she recalls. "The situation is very difficult and the next days are going to be very difficult. Of course, Israel's going to respond."



An autistic boy gets comfort playing with the dogs before the war. /Sulala Society for Animal Care

Keuleers watched the news in blank disbelief.

"We used the word crazy, like Saeed used the word crazy so much. How was it possible that this was happening? We absolutely thought it was impossible – and everybody was terrified of the response."

The mood among Sulala workers was one of shock and fear.

"I asked him if he slept that night. He said, 'No, I didn't'. And said you have to sleep. So Saeed said 'I'm going to make sure that I get a lot of extra food for the animals now and then I will sleep.'"



As Israel formulated its response, Keuleers again heard of developments through the Sulala network.

"I saw a text from the Australian donor organization saying, 'What's going on? They're telling all of the people in the north of Gaza to go south.' I'm thinking, 'No, it's not possible...' I texted Saeed 'Did you see this news?' Saeed was saying 'It's just rumors, we don't know if that's true.'

"And then his internet got cut."

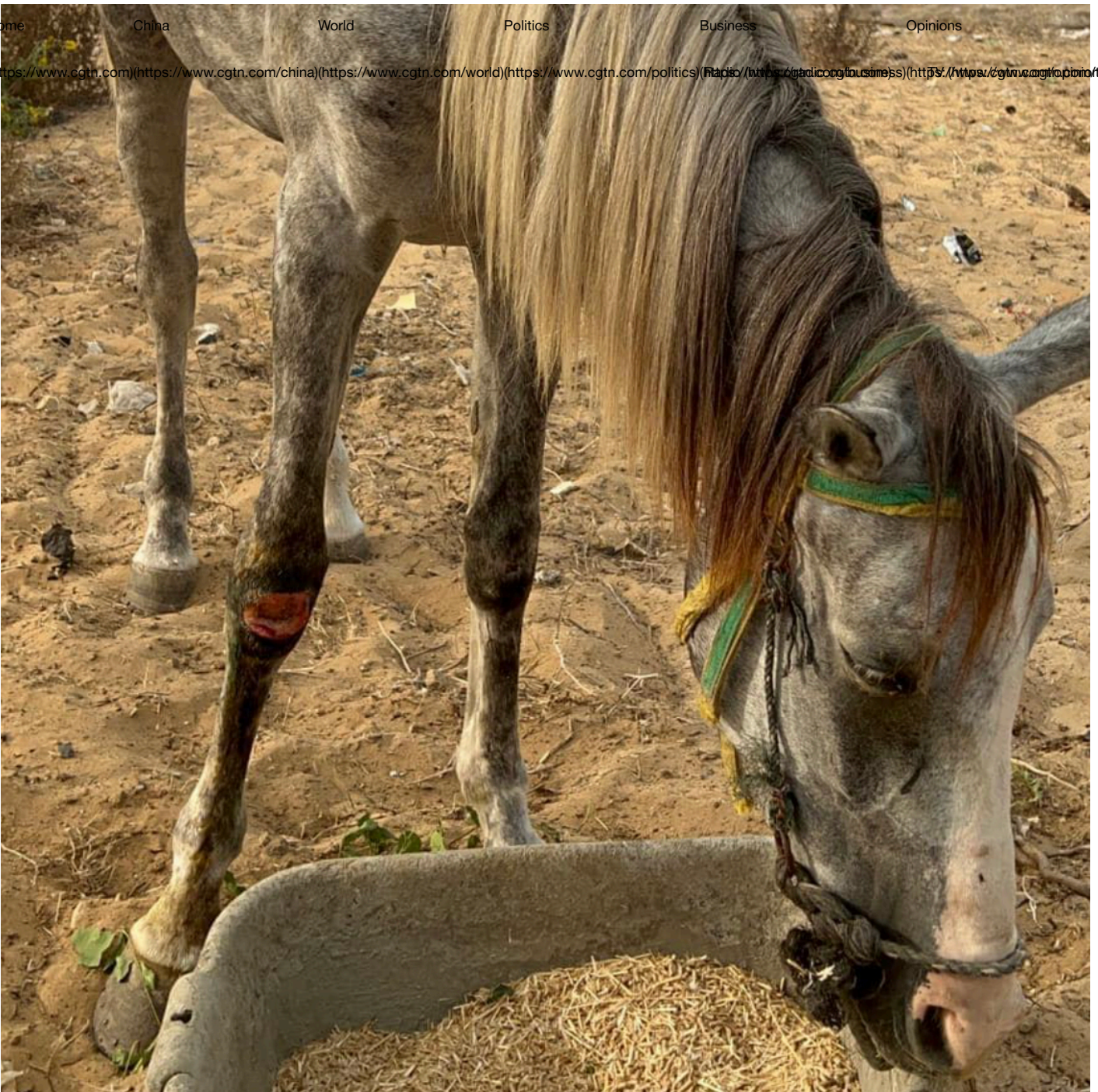
Such outages became increasingly common. "The internet from Gaza was often down after October 7 – it became much harder to communicate with the shelter," says Keuleers, who worried about the effect of a Gazan exodus on the animals.

"We knew that if they (Gazan citizens) have to go away from their houses, they might not return. So I didn't know what Saeed was going to do."

An echo from history

Watching the footage of Gazans moving south, Keuleers was acutely aware of an echo from history: "It looked exactly like the *Nakba* – the expulsion of Palestinians in 1948."

Nakba – Arabic for catastrophe – is the word many people use for the mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Al Err's grandmother lived through the Nakba, so Keuleers knew the images were deeply distressing for him and other Gazans.



Treating a horse injured in the evacuation. /Sulala Society for Animal Care

But the animals' hero was busy leading another group: "That night, I called Saeed and he said, 'I am safe. I got all the animals out and we are south of Wadi Gaza.'"

He and his family had managed to relocate all 120 cats to an apartment further south, mindful of the Israeli order. But as the bombing intensified over the next few days, the dogs became terrified.

"They are traumatized and conditioned to the war," says Keuleers. "They know that they have to hide. They know the sound the plane makes. And they're absolutely terrified and hiding all day."



A kitten is rescued from the rubble. /Sulala Society for Animal Care

With aid trucks denied access to Gaza and fuel running out, Sulala workers were worried that soon they may not be able to reach the dogs. Sa'ed Al Err, Saeed's son, decided to evacuate the dogs to Saeed's family home, 500 meters north of the evacuation line.

It was in Al Zahra, an area with a lot of schools and hospitals and now a lot of refugees. Everyone was confident people would be safe there. With fuel very scarce, Sa'ed took on the mammoth task of migrating the dogs in convoy by foot for miles to their new home.

Two days later, the whole area of Al Zahra felt the full power of Israeli airstrikes.

A neighborhood laid to waste

All the buildings surrounding the house were completely destroyed, as the neighborhood was laid to waste. The family home harboring Al Err and his dogs was badly damaged but miraculously stayed standing; however, with the windows and doors blown out during the night of bombing, most dogs fled for their lives.

"Saeed was there that night with the dogs and I think this was truly a traumatic, life-changing experience – to be there in the shelter with those dogs while it was being bombed," says Keuleers.

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Saeed's house in a devastated neighbourhood. /Sulala Society for Animal Care.

Many of the dogs made their way back to the shelter and Sulala has now decided to let them stay there. Al Err secured food for the animals for about a month but that is set to run out soon.

Now Gazans are running out of food, water and fuel, standing in line for water and bread and the UN is already unable to secure aid. The outlook is grim for the animals of Gaza.

"He had gas for two more days," says Keuleers. "Gaza has a desalination plant for its water, but they're not letting in fuel to run the generators so it's not working any more. So the water is quite salty... he's scavenging every day looking for these things.

"It's all very painful and very confusing and helpless. And it's very scary not to know what the future holds for everybody."

Keuleers has been calling on Sulala to write messages to international organizations to secure food for Gaza's animals in the midst of the chaos of war: "We understand that humans need food most, but there can maybe also be space to put animal food there."

Taking its toll

While obviously horrific for Palestinians, the situation is also taking a toll on Keuleers and the other helpless followers of Sulala outside Gaza.

"I feel like he really deserves the world and he doesn't deserve this suffering, so it's incredibly painful. And I see this also in the people who contact us on social media. They want to help so badly.

"It's so difficult, this helplessness. It's killing Saeed, it's killing the animals, it's killing me that I can't help Saeed, it's killing our followers or people watching it. They can't do anything to stop the suffering in Gaza right now."



Keuleers keeps spirits up with texts shared on the Facebook Page. /Keuleers

As the war drags on, Keuleers is increasingly worried about not just the animals but Al Err's safety: "Now that he's saying everybody is waiting for their turn to die. So, first of all, I hope he survives."

But that's not the only hope Keuleers holds, like a flickering candle from afar.

"I hope for a future in which I can visit him – that I would be able to go to Gaza and actually help him on the ground. I've no bigger dream than that – to be able to physically help these animals. It's absolutely my dream."

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"Maybe what comes after the war is better than what was before. We don't know how, but maybe Gaza will open – maybe I will meet him somewhere safe."

With thanks to the [Sulala Society for Animal Care](https://sulalaanimalrescue.com/) (https://sulalaanimalrescue.com/).



The children of Gaza take comfort in the animals. /Sulala Society for Animal Care

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