

[Transcript] Vinohradská 12 / Bellingcat: Facts about Gaza's hospital blast

We begin our reporting Gaza where a blast has destroyed a hospital potentially killing hundreds.

The BBC Verify team has been analysing all the images and video that have emerged. And this footage shows what appears to be the courtyard car park of the hospital in flames. The Israeli military says it was not their missile but a failed rocket launch from Islamic Jihad terrorists.

A deadly blast at the Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza.

Who is to blame and how many people died there?

Everyone has their own opinion.

Meanwhile, journalists from around the world are searching for the truth.

How to fact check the information from the battlefield?

Like questions for Kolyna Koltai, a researcher at the Bellingcat.

It's Monday, October 23rd.

So let's take a look on what happened last week on Tuesday evening at the Gaza City.

A deadly explosion hit Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza City and while searching for a perpetrator, media outlets around the world didn't hesitate to blame one or another side of the conflict for this blast.

A few days later, are we sure what happened that evening in Gaza?

You know, we are still looking and analysing the footage.

You know, I know that there are several other organisations and different governments that have come out blaming one side and confirming but us here at Bellingcat, we still have not been able to come to our own conclusion.

You know, we rely on open source information and open source data, so stuff that is available to the public and basing our assessments on that, it is still unclear, we are still working through it and sometimes it takes time.

We don't want to jump to a conclusion, so it can maybe be days, it could be weeks before we truly can come to a concrete explanation of what happened.

You were among the first analysts and journalists to investigate the incident, so where did you look for the evidence?

Yeah, it's interesting.

We are actually a really globally distributed team, you know, from people all over the world and I remember looking at our Slack and someone posted a message like, oh my gosh, I think there has been an attack on a hospital.

And so everyone that was awake at that moment was able to go and start collecting and archiving images and videos and whatever sort of data we could find across different social media platforms.

So we were looking at X or Twitter, we looked at TikTok, we looked at Telegram, Facebook, Instagram, you name it, just to see if we can get, you know, video and images of what's happening there.

And of course, you know, what happens is that there are certainly images and videos that didn't accurately represent the situation.

So you know, we found videos that were actually, you know, a few years old or ones that weren't of the right area.

And so as we go through this, it's a time intensive process to make sure when we start

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analyzing videos that we think might be related to it, that it is truly of the case.

Have you looked for the posts of people who witnessed the blast as well?

Yeah, we were trying to, this is part of the hard part is, you know, it can be really tough to tell and some, depending on the platform, the source, right?

So obviously we want to look to people who are there on the ground, who like live in Gaza, who are able to give us those videos, you know, sometimes people find videos online, share them, but they don't put an attribution, they don't say where their source is, which makes it really hard.

And so we have to try to, you know, rely on our own skills to geolocate the videos and make sure it isn't an older video or older image.

Speaking of geolocation, how do you geolocate the videos on social media?

You know, this is why we didn't even initially put something out right away because we were just looking at, you know, security camera or live streams or something that was taken at night because the blast in our port happened at night in Gaza.

And so it is much harder to do that.

So we actually, we're working on putting that together and then daylight happened.

So then we were able to see much better videos and images, which makes it much easier to geolocate it.

And since we already kind of had an idea of that, it might have been the Al-Hali Hospital, we were looking at the videos and footage to look at particular identifying features that might be unique to the area.

We sometimes look at satellite images and we looked at images that were released even by, say, like, Israel's and IDF and we looked at a variety of different sources so that when we look at, say, an image or a video, it does look like it is something that is of that area because of unique features like a tree, a park, a wall.

And in addition to that, you know that it might be a recent video, not just because we don't find it anywhere else on the internet, it's because a particular damage is pretty unique.

You know, and for example, we focus on a crater damage in the article and analysis we put out.

A Bellingcat contradicted the statement from IDF that there is no actual crater at the site.

How?

Yeah.

So we even reached out to them for comment and we, I think, heard back, which is what something they even put out publicly, I think, on their statements.

I think they changed their language a little bit from saying that there is no crater to maybe no large crater.

So it's a little bit unclear, but we do believe that that crater that we found is significant and related to the incident, the attack at the hospital.

You know, we're able to do that because that is unique.

We don't find evidence of that crater in images or videos of the hospital days beforehand.

So we do feel like that is something that is a recent crater and it is something that we can tell that is very close to that hospital and sort of this park grassy area right next

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to the hospital.

And so we do feel like that is there is a crater there.

We have the videos.

We have images that do appear to be a recent none of that exact area.

We have to make a little detour here.

The Israeli defense forces almost immediately denied any involvement in the blast.

The press conference was led by Daniel Hagari, an IDF spokesperson.

Hagari claimed that the explosion was caused by a misfire rocket from Islamic Jihad.

Allegedly, it was launched from a cemetery nearby the hospital.

Islamic Jihad is one of the militant organizations operating alongside Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

According to Hagari, Hamas learned what really happened and launched a global campaign to blame Israel for the disaster.

The only location damage is outside the hospital in the parking lot where we can see signs of burning, no cratering.

The IDF provided two infrared pictures taken and decided to support the claim that the rocket was launched by Islamic Jihad.

Moreover, they have published a recording of an intercepted call between two members of Hamas.

On the recording, one Hamas member tells the other, much to his surprise, that the hospital was hit by a rocket launched by Islamic Jihad.

The Israeli version of what happened was endorsed by the US President Joe Biden, who's plane landed in Israel just hours after the blast.

Hamas insists that Israel is the one who is responsible for the explosion.

The influential cut-ery news television network Al Jazeera provides its own analysis of what happened.

According to their journalists, there is no evidence for a connection between the blasts, spotted in the air and the explosion in the hospital area.

Al Jazeera published a story with a woman called Neveen.

Reportedly, she lives near the Allahli Hospital.

On a Tuesday evening, Neveen heard a very strong explosion and I witnessed a huge fire at the site.

Meanwhile, independent investigation of the event was launched by investigative journalist teams from all over the world, such as BBC Verify or Bellingcat.

IDF says it was a failed rocket fired by Islamic Jihad that caused the explosion.

So can you confirm that?

Yeah, we cannot confirm that yet.

What we can tell so far from the size of the crater is that it doesn't necessarily seem consistent with something that's called a JDAM, which is like a joint defense attack munition, which usually makes bigger craters.

And one of the other theories I know that's being floated around is that maybe it might have been in JDAM that then exploded in air, which would have caused a smaller crater like we see.

But really without evidence of what the actual munition looks like, these are just all theories.

Was it a smaller rocket that did this or was it a JDAM that broke up and didn't hit directly?

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So it is really hard to tell at the moment.

I remember listening to meteorologists saying that the speed of a tornado could be estimated by the destruction of a tree bark.

So could you define the type of a rocket just by looking at the crater?

This is why it's so great to have people who are experts on our team, because we are a big collective.

And so I think we are looking at trajectory, we're doing additional analysis.

We are currently trying to work on that.

But we don't want to put anything out yet until we are confident that we can stand behind it.

Sometimes a lot of this work takes time, so it isn't something that's done instantaneously.

And sometimes we just wait until maybe there's an additional image or additional photo that really truly confirms it.

Because it could be really dangerous to jump to a conclusion, especially if we are not 100% certain.

And do we know if it was a rocket?

We know that something detonated there.

It's hard to say if it's a rocket, a missile or whatever term, but we do know there was something that exploded at that spot to cause that crater damage.

The visual evidence from the site suggests that the hospital buildings are intact.

Can you confirm that?

What we can confirm so far is that there was definitely at least that crater that was next to the hospital in that grassy area.

And what we know is that from that grassy area, there were people who were camping and sleeping in their area, which is what most likely they think aided to the loss of life that we're seeing there.

And so it's hard to tell.

We have some footage that we've seen of the hospital area being damaged, but we haven't been able to fully confirm those yet, so we didn't put anything out yet.

Because again, we do try to really make sure that the footage we're seeing accurately represents that situation.

And it's not maybe misinformation that we are spreading.

Do you have any people on the ground now?

We don't.

And that's what I think the amazing work of doing open source research is that I'm here in the US.

I have colleagues that are in Amsterdam and people all across the world.

And we're trying to do this work without having someone there on the ground.

But having people there is obviously really important because we rely on those images and those videos from people who are there.

But yeah, we do rely on using that open source content.

So from anywhere you can do this work and what we do.

BBC reporter from the side has reported that people are still collecting body parts.

That is a quotation.

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So is there any evidence supporting the Casa's Health Ministry report which right after the blast mentioned hundreds of casualties?

I think it's too early to tell and it's really hard to tell for us.

We were looking at videos and images and I think it's fair to say that people died in this attack.

How many?

We don't know yet.

We're still trying to figure that out.

I don't know if anyone has an exact number just quite yet.

We probably guess it's more than one.

Is it a thousand?

It's probably less than a thousand.

But where it is exactly, it's hard to tell for us.

IDF says that the number was deliberately inflated.

Do you have any evidence to support their statement?

Yeah, we do not.

That's why sometimes those reports on the ground are really important because there are people there who can physically count the bodies.

We can look at video footage, but even then it's hard to tell so that we count in the video how many are there.

But sometimes with the type of work we do, we can't debunk or verify every single claim.

We can only add different pieces and parts to the mystery.

So in trying to solve the question of who was responsible or what's happening, we wanted to put out something that here is at least a piece of this puzzle, and this piece being the crater.

But sometimes there are some things that are out there that just cannot be solved with open source.

Sometimes it's just a question of who do you believe or not?

Sometimes or sometimes just holding off and waiting until more information comes out.

And that's sometimes what we have to do is it's really tough because it's something as emotional and troublesome and so egregious as an attack on a hospital.

And I know that what I read that I said, and I gasped hearing that, is we want to be able to know who is responsible, we want to know who to blame for such an atrocity.

And so we wanted that answer right away.

But sometimes it takes time, especially when you hear so many different conflicting narratives, so many different conflicting pieces of evidence, and it's not immediately clear.

So it may take another day, it may take weeks, it may take a month.

We don't know yet.

And oftentimes when we do open source research, we'll spend weeks or months on investigation because we really want to make sure we are not only double checking, triple checking, making sure we have all the evidence to back up our claims that it's all transparent, that the work that we're doing is not hidden behind some mysterious curtain that we're being clear of where we got our sources and how do we come to our conclusion.

So as far as comes to Bellingham, we'll have to wait when we are working on it, but when,

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that's hard to say.

We're talking here about the conflict between Israel and Hamas.

That is a word that is streamed online, and it is befucked by disinformation.

Why is that?

Oh my gosh, it is tough.

I've been studying this information for a number of years, and it feels just as chaotic as I've just about ever seen it.

During times of uncertainty, and of course in breaking news, there's always the ability for misinformation to fill the gap.

And I think that's obviously accelerated when it comes to war and conflict.

And so it's not just the conflict that's happening physically in Gaza and in Israel, but it's also very much like an information war.

It's important because I think you want people to support you on your side.

So there is, I think, a real benefit to each side if the misinformation goes their way.

Who do you support?

Do you support Palestinians, or do you support Israel, or do you support someone else?

And it becomes really difficult, I think, for your everyday person, just trying to figure out what's going on because you don't know what to believe, you don't know which side.

And I think we all have a tendency to want to believe information that fits within our biases.

And even there was just recently this case in the US where this man who was really invested in the conflict was reading a lot of content and got so worried about Muslims in his community that he ended up attacking a mother and her child and killed the six-year-old boy.

And that is, I think, a direct relationship to the content he was reading online.

I don't know if he was looking at misinformation online, but he was certainly looking at content that advocated for the narrative that Muslims are dangerous and Palestinians are dangerous, so much so that he tried to attack and kill his tenants.

He was their landlord.

So it is something that impacts us all in ways that we don't even anticipate.

What effect could it all have on the real war on the ground?

I think it can really affect people on the ground because we take the idea that, say, we look at public opinion and support and where we're putting our money and where are we trying to help people, you know, you're going to be affecting one side or the other if you are supporting one side and you're trying to provide resources.

And not only that, it can affect the types of actions and policies that are enacted by people in power.

We think that it's an issue just for maybe your everyday person, but misinformation can affect people as high as being the president, right?

Even President Biden here in the U.S. spoke the other day about seeing images of beheaded babies.

The press office had to come out and correct him afterwards and he was spreading misinformation because he had confirmed that, even though I don't think his team had independently confirmed that yet.

There's a little bit of misinformation that happened there when he's the president.

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So it's something that can affect everyone, and particularly when we see a position of power, it's going to obviously affect the people who are there in the conflict.

And it could be used in a propaganda as a very powerful weapon as well.

Yes, yes, absolutely.

So do you find it difficult but necessary to focus on a proper analysis as you do?

Yeah, I mean, it is really, really difficult.

It's absolutely necessary because there is so much information online and it takes time to wade through it.

And I think everyone wants to have their hot take, their 15 minutes in which they are going viral because they want it to be first, but I don't think it's as important to be first.

I think it's more important to be accurate.

So I think we all have the tendency, particularly in a breaking event where we want to know what's going on.

We even have the tendency to want to share it, like, oh, my gosh, I saw this, let me share it because other people need to know.

And I think we're all victim to that, myself included in that.

But when it comes to role of journalists and role of researchers, we just can't, we have a bigger duty and a bigger responsibility to making sure that we are taking the moment to think about before we post something, making sure we're doing a really thorough analysis. So that way, do we put out something, we don't need to come back with a correction because that also can damage the trust the public has in what's being said.

So I think we all have a responsibility to of course try to be quick because people want to know what's going on.

But I think we even have this great responsibility to be accurate and verify our sources before we share anything.

And that's all for today.

This was an English version of the latest Czech radio news podcast episode.

Thank you for listening.