



Life On Hold

WHEN GOD SEEMS FAR AWAY

by Naim Ateek

In normal times, pilgrims from around the world come to visit the Holy Land. The religious among them whether Muslims, Jews, or Christians long to experience the presence of God in a special way. After all, is not this the place where the three monotheistic religions have risen and where God had communicated with humans as attested in the various holy books? I have heard many Christian pilgrims tell me how spiritually uplifting it has been for them to visit those places associated with the life of Jesus Christ. They have gone back home having been enriched by their pilgrimage. Indeed, the Holy Land has been a fifth gospel in the experience of many pilgrims and for many centuries.

Certainly, for most Christians, the Holy Land is the place where heaven touched earth in the Incarnation; where divinity took on humanity; and where God came to live among us humans (John 1:14). Many pilgrims, therefore, expect to feel the closeness of the presence of God in the Holy Land in a unique way. Indeed, this has been the experience of myriads of people. As one observes the increasing Israeli government oppression of the Palestinians and its ability to escape any form of censure, the Holy Land appears today to be the most God-forsaken place. There is no one to stop Israel's aggression or hold it accountable.

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Obviously this is not the first time in history where people of power do what they like, oblivious of others and of God. The arrogance of power makes them believe that they are able to render God marginal and useless. In their illusion, they imagine that they can neutralize God's power and make God ineffective and uninvolved.

This issue of Cornerstone tells stories of torment of Palestinians living on the West Bank including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. They are only samples of the anguish of most Palestinians. They are intended to help the reader feel, though thousands of miles away, the unbearable every day life of fellow human beings who live under the yoke of an oppressive Israeli occupation. Even those of us who live in Jerusalem or inside the state of Israel cannot fully comprehend the anguish of our fellow brothers and sisters who live in the heart of the West Bank and Gaza.

Recently, I observed some of this when along with 30 other men and women, we were guided through a settlement tour with Jeff Halper, a Jewish peace activist. We stopped at Qalandia checkpoint north of Jerusalem. At the time, there were possibly a hundred or so Palestinians trying to enter the Ramallah area. The soldiers did not seem to be in a hurry as they examined their Identity Cards. Then for one reason or another, the soldiers discontinued their checking, left the people, men, women, and children, young and old, stranded under the heat of the sun at their mercy. I have been told that this happens often when soldiers decide to take a break or when they want to punish the people collectively. It does not take a genius to see and feel the humiliation of the Palestinians.

Can the government of Israel place God on hold while it carries out all the injustices against the Palestinians? Can people of power really believe that God does not care, or that God is absent, or even that there is no God to watch or take account of their injustice? Any cursory reading of the stories below tends to give that impression and induce the question, where is God? Due to the worsening situation, this has become a recurring theme of my writing.

Many Christians refrain from expressing

words of complaint against God for fear of being sacrilegious. Maybe it is part of our eastern mindset that makes us hesitant to challenge or confront God in our prayers. **Yet in the tradition of faith, it is not wrong to stand before God and express one's frustration and grievances.**

A number of psalms begin with such complaints. "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Ps. 13:1-2); or "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest" (Psalm 22:1-2).

For a little more detail, one can take Psalm 10 as a case in point. This is one of the psalms of lament where the individual lays his case before God in quite candid words. "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (Psalm 10:1). The psalmist is complaining that the wicked do not believe that God would catch up with them and could hold them accountable for their injustice (vs. 4,13). The psalmist's faith is, however, strong in God. "But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands; the helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan" (vs. 13-14). The plea of the psalmist is very specific. He wants God to break the power of the oppressors and bring their oppression to an end (vs.15); and to "let them be caught in the schemes they have devised" (vs. 2). He calls on God to "Rise up" and not to forget the oppressed (vs. 12).

One commentator has said that one third of the Psalms are devoted "to psalms of lament by the individual, telling us in no uncertain terms that authentic worship emerges when worshipers dare to express their pain and raise before God their deepest questions about the reign of injustice in the world" (J. David Pleins, *The Psalms: Songs of Tragedy, Hope, and Justice*, Orbis Books, 1993 p.13). In fact, authentic worship is when people articulate before God their grief, doubts, frustration in candor as they do their

praise and thanksgiving. They are the prayers of people that arise out of the depths of the misery of life under occupation. Prayers that Palestinians lift up not only in the churches and mosques but on the impossible roads of the West Bank and Gaza, as they queue at checkpoints, or as they watch a home being demolished and a family become homeless, or as they, young or old, men or women, undergo humiliation by Israeli soldiers in so many situations of oppression.

In such moments, God seems to be far away, absent, or unconcerned, and the political burden of tyranny is heavy and intolerable. Some curse and swear others send out deep sighs of distress and anger, while others lift a silent plea to God to lift the massive load of injustice. "Words of anger at God are terribly uncomfortable, but the psalmists recognized that worship will remain a shallow affair if the worshiper's rage is left outside the sanctuary. This willingness to give expression to the agony of the sufferer is, in biblical terms, an act of worship. To speak from one's pain and oppression – to no longer hide one's rage over injustice – is the essential first step in approaching the God who, in our suffering seems to be so aloof" (Pleins, p.16).

Unfortunately, in so many of our churches today, our acts of worship do not reflect this involvement and connectedness between worship and the daily reality of life, between the liturgy and the suffering and oppression of the people outside. Sometimes the "church" seems to be living in a different world than that of its members. It is not God that is absent, it is the church that is distant and absent; and is not involved in the struggle of its people; and, therefore, sadly and unintentionally, keeps God insulated and shut up from the oppressed outside. "Our liturgies cannot afford to remain numb to human suffering, especially if our hope is to construct a spirituality rooted in justice (Pleins, p. 21). "The challenge for worship, whether ancient or modern, is to find a way to move on to praise and thanksgiving without negating the grief of abandonment. To offer praise when grieving is really needed only compounds the emptiness the worshiper feels and leads to a painful separation between worship and

life. The worship that offers strength is a worship that is willing to follow the worshiper down to Sheol and the Pit, to the lowest levels of abandonment”(Pleins, p. 21). Palestinian Christians receive great solace in the experience of Jesus’ disciples on the boat on the Sea of Galilee. The raging sea with the high waves and heavy wind threatened their life as Jesus lay in the stern asleep. They woke him up saying, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” The wind ceased and there was calm. Then Jesus addressed them saying, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”(Mark 4:35-41).

Today, our experience is like that of the disciples. We are in

the midst of a raging sea tossed about by the Israeli military that is slowly drowning us. The threats and dangers are immense. In our fear and agony, we boldly address God saying, “Do you not care that we are perishing?” The answer is clear, “Peace! Be still!” “Do not be afraid, I am with you”. This is the assurance that we cling to. We know that God is with us in the midst of our struggle against injustice. Let us continue our work together for a just peace.

The stories in this issue of Cornerstone are meant to be material for prayer and advocacy. We believe that God cares as many of you care. The occupation must end.

The Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek is President of Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center

The Myth Of Self-defense

by Jonathan Kuttab

Among the hierarchy of values that ought to govern the decision making of any governmental unit, human life is clearly the highest. This truism has been twisted by Israel to provide blanket moral and political justification for its most oppressive policies:

First, this value was translated into a "security" argument, since the ostensible purpose of security arrangements were to safeguard human lives. It may well be argued that security forces not only have the right but even the duty to do every thing in their power to safeguard the lives of those under their responsibility. Faced with this supreme value, who can object, argue, or protest any "security" measures???

The fallacy is that Israeli "security" arguments do not necessarily have to do with saving human lives at all. The Israeli definition of security is very broad and encompasses many elements that have nothing to do with human life. Self-defense operations are often aimed at eliminating lives, whether the lives of enemy suspects (targeted killings and assassinations) or admittedly innocent lives ("collateral damage").

"Human lives" if they are not Jewish, are not a major component of Israel's security concerns. Dropping a one ton bomb into a crowded Gaza housing area (killing 15 innocent Palestinians) may well be considered a successful "security" operation since non-Jewish lives lost were deemed of little value, and the primary "security" requirement was the elimination of a Palestinian fighter (who threatens, who may have threatened). But even saving or protecting Jewish lives is not the only or major consideration in Israeli security. The definition includes political goals such as the erection of illegal settlements, the acquisition of Arab land, the maintenance of the occupation, and the protection of structures and institutions promoting these goals. By labeling all the above "security" considerations Israel avoids reasoned debate, and clothes all these concerns with the absolute and supreme value that attaches to human life and its sacredness. The success of that argument has led to its further use to justify all manner of population control, economic deprivations, violations and restrictions of rights, particularly freedom of movement, as well as controls over all areas of Palestinian life.

Finally, "security" is claimed at the most mundane and individual level by every petty bureaucrat or soldier who engages in racist, humiliating and sadistic behavior towards the Palestinians, particularly at checkpoints, hiding behind the rubric of "self-defense".

An example of how this process occurs is in Jerusalem. Since 1967, Israel has illegally annexed East Jerusalem and the adjoining villages into Israel. It has followed a policy of attempting to Judaize the Holy City, separate it from the rest of the occupied territories, and strangle its population economically, socially, and politically. To achieve this goal, it has also restricted access to the city under laws that control entry of Palestinians into Israel. The ostensible reason for the prohibition is "security concerns" but every Palestinian who was forced to circumvent, on foot, and with much hardship, these barriers, in order to enter the Arab areas of East Jerusalem, knows full well that the restrictions have nothing to do with security or safety of Israel and Israelis , but serve the goal of asserting Israeli control over Jerusalem in the face of an international consensus that rejects its annexation.

Security and the protection of human lives is indeed a legitimate concern and a proper value, but every time the word is used by Israel, it is worthwhile to be skeptical and look to the real interests that are being advanced, before submissively accepting this as an absolute and supreme value.

Jonathan Kuttab is an attorney, a human rights activist and a Sabeel board member

Humanitarian Situation

in

the Occupied Palestinian Territory

The human security as a basic measure of people's well being (comprising physical security, psychosocial environment, social participation and economic life, freedom of movement, etc.) is perhaps, the most powerful indicator to gauge the socio-humanitarian situation in the oPt (occupied Palestinian territories).

At least 600,000 Palestinians live under intermittent curfews and most of the time are confined to their residences, thus unable to adequately exercise their economic and social activities. Recent reports ("The Effects of Israel's Operation Defensive Shield on Palestinian children living in the West Bank" Birzeit University, July 2002) indicate that up to 37 percent of families in curfewed cities house other families because of life threatening danger, destroyed or occupied houses, or being stranded and unable to reach their homes. Over 50 percent of families in areas under curfew report considerable damages to their neighborhoods; and 28 to 59 percent of families are reportedly exposed to shooting on a daily basis; Homes of 30 to 50 percent of urban residents of curfewed areas have been searched by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), often (12 percent of cases) accompanied by the arrests of at least one family member.

Travel by Palestinians between cities and villages has come to an almost complete halt. The principal economic result has been a near complete cessation of all productive activity in the main West Bank centers of manufacturing, construction, commerce and private and public services. Activities in these centers account for at least 75 percent of the value of goods and services produced in the West Bank (UNSCO estimates based on national income account data provided by PCBS, January 2001. The assumption here is that nearly all manufacturing, and the bulk of commerce, construction and services are produced in the urban areas of the West Bank). The Palestinian economy will cease to function completely should the current closure regime be undetermined in its length, as announced by the IDF.

The psychological and social consequences of human insecurity are just as grim. A Bir Zeit University survey conducted in May 2002, indicated that 87 percent of 764 West Bank households interviewed reported facing mental health problems of one or more family members during the March-April incursions, including great fear amongst children, uncontrolled shivering, crying, lost appetites and sleep problems. On average, 78 percent of the interviewees reported persistent feelings of "despair and misery" over what is happening to their lives and over the general deterioration of the situation.

Independent studies also reveal alarming social trends, such as increased domestic violence against women in the Palestinian society. Researchers attribute the increased domestic tensions to the massive frustration of men, who are unable to fulfil their breadwinner role.

*Excerpts from Status Report drafted for The Quartet (European Union, United Nations, United States, Russian Federation)
By OCHA with inputs USAID, Italy, AIDA/OXFAM, Italy, LACC Co-Chairs, WHO, WCLAC, August 2002*

CHILDREN OF PALESTINE

by Eyad El Sarraj

"In every child there is a 'God,' and no one has the right to kill that 'God,' especially in the name of 'God.'"

During the recent Id Al-Adha (Feast of Sacrifice), the holiest day in the Muslim calendar, an occasion of peace and humility to God, Muslims flocked to Mecca for the pilgrimage. For the children of Gaza, the feast was far from peaceful. They filled the streets with joyful screams and games. They were all armed with their toy guns and were shooting at each other. Many of these children are bed wetters, hyperactive and aggressive, with problems at school. They have layers of trauma buried inside. Worse still, many of them are stunted in their physical development, maybe also in their cognitive functioning, due to chronic malnutrition.

To be a child in a refugee camp in Gaza, or anywhere else in the West Bank, is not the best choice for normal growth and development. There is so much fear and sadness all around. If it is not an Israeli F-16 fighter jet shelling from above, then it could be a father's beating, or a mother screaming. A child has to be very modest in his demands and requests. Many do not know of toys, except for plastic guns.

The most valid description of Palestinian children is that they are sad, angry and defiant. They are also tense and vigilant. Many are without a smile. These children have learned the language and the meaning of the occupation. Not every child is humiliated by Israeli soldiers or told that his or her life is worthless. The environment, however, sends this message loudly and clearly.

Children are well aware of the differences between living conditions in their dirty camps and in the newly built Israeli settlements. These differences tell them that Jewish children living in the settlements deserve big, clean playgrounds and swimming pools, while their refugee camps have open sewer systems and garbage piled high at every street corner. The buildings and the streets of the settlements are clean, and the grass gets watered even when there are water shortages in the refugee camps. Palestinian children observe settlers zooming by in fast, well-protected cars that project an aura of power and security, in contrast to their own feelings of vulnerability.

The language of the occupation sends the message that life is not worth living; that children born in the settlements are the treasured children while children born in Palestinian camps, villages, or towns are despised. This environment drives home the message that the Palestinians are born to be the hewers of wood and drawers of water both for the settlers and for the Israeli economy. The children witness their fathers' and older brothers' humiliation as they stand in line at the "slave market," hoping to be offered one of the few jobs available: building yet another Israeli settlement.

Behind every one of today's suicide bombers is a personal tragedy. Many of them are simply taking revenge for their earlier traumas ten years ago. Suicide bombers of today were the children of the first Intifada. The "children of the stone" were not made of stone. They suffered pain and fear. The extent of their exposure to traumatic events is horrific even in absolute figures.

At that time, it was found that 85% of the children's houses were raided by Israeli soldiers, mostly at night, and 56% of the children had witnessed the beating and humiliation of their fathers at the hands of Israeli soldiers. Such experiences leave indelible marks on children's perceptions of themselves and the world around them. "If my father could not protect himself", children wonder, "how on earth is he going to protect me?" The inevitable reaction is a mixture of fear, frustration, helplessness, anger, and - perhaps most tragically - rejection of the father. Some children found themselves identifying with Israeli soldiers as symbols of power. That was traumatic, because it led to tension. Today they are not throwing stones, but are shooting and carry explosives. But they are leaving behind a new generation of children who are being introduced to the same old game.

Two recent nutritional assessments (CARE/JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY/USAID, PCBS/UNICEF) indicate an increase in the number of malnourished children. The CARE assessment report shows that 22 percent of children 6-59 months of age living in the West Bank and Gaza suffer from moderate and severe acute malnutrition- 9.3 and 13 percent, respectively. The findings of this assessment is particularly alarming in the Gaza Strip where 13.2 percent of children aged 6 to 59 months are reported to have moderate and severe acute malnutrition- a rate comparable to those of Saharan Africa.

Most recent estimates of the Palestinian Ministry of Social Affairs indicates that some 85,000 families with hardship statuses, including mainly female-headed households, or households whose main breadwinner is elderly, disabled or chronically ill, are in urgent need of assistance (cash allowance and food rations). Since 2001 UNRWA has been providing humanitarian assistance (food and cash) to a total of 216,000 poor refugee families. This represents a 57% increase in UNRWA beneficiary caseload compared to the previous year. Likewise, World Food Program has increased its beneficiary caseload by 39 %, from 370,000 to 500,000 people, an unprecedented figure in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt). from Status Rep-

When, in 1993, the Oslo accords were signed between Israel and the PLO, a sense of hope gripped the people. Many Palestinians were excited; at last they would be free.

But peace still remained remote and unattainable. Freedom was only a hollow promise. The disillusionment with the peace process deepened as the Palestinian Authority conducted itself in chaos and widespread corruption, with little regard to basic human rights. But it was Ariel Sharon's provocative entry to the Dome of the Rock that triggered the new uprising.

In September 2000, the Holy Land was turned into a battlefield. The children of yesterday became the militants of today as the new uprising was quickly taken over by armed groups facing the superior Israeli army. As Palestinian militants started shooting, the Israeli government responded with massive firepower, blockades, destruction and killings. Extremists responded with horrific suicide bombings, killing civilians inside Israel. Gaza was sealed off and transformed into a prison, but a prison without a roof, as F-16s and Apache helicopters were free to deliver their bombs night and day. Violence became the norm. Children on both sides were slaughtered and maimed.

Ibrahim (14 years old) was awakened by a sudden strong sound at 23:50 p.m. on 22 July 2002. His home was in El-Daraj neighborhood, which was attacked by a one-ton F-16 bomb. Ibrahim was sleeping in his room with his brothers and sister at the time of the attack. He woke up terrified by the explosion. He didn't know what had happened and couldn't see anything. Because there was no electricity, he thought that there was an earthquake. He jumped quickly and rushed outside his room. Running, he tripped and fell to the ground. He felt something hot and soft. He had tripped over pieces of human flesh.

By candlelight, Ibrahim saw that his hands were covered with blood. He panicked and started to search for his brothers and sisters frantically. However, he couldn't find anyone at home. So, he ran to the street, where he found ambulances and the remains of the 9 children killed in the raid scattered all over the area, or buried under the remains of the destroyed buildings.

Since the attack, Ibrahim developed post-traumatic stress disorder – PTSD – and refuses to go back to his home or even his neighborhood. His nights are without sleep and full of night terror and panic attacks. Ibrahim wears his street clothes and shoes at night in case of another Israeli attack.

At the beginning of this current uprising, "Al-Aqsa Intifada," many children were in the front lines of

confrontations with the mighty Israeli military machine.

Ahmad is 12 years old and lives in El-Zaytoon neighborhood in Gaza city. He is the youngest child in a large family. Ahmad's father is suffering from leukemia and used to receive treatment in an Israeli hospital. However, the Israeli authorities have prevented the father from reaching that hospital for treatment for 10 years, since the beginning of Al-Aqsa Intifada.

As he watches his father suffer from disease and unable to receive therapy, Ahmad is so angry at the occupation. He used the road junction near the Israeli settlement of Netzarim to throw stones at the Israeli soldiers. In one of these instances, Ahmad witnessed the death of one of his friends and the injury of others.

Since then, Ahmad is suffering from sleep disturbances. He is provoked easily and is aggressive towards his family and classmates. At school, his concentration and performance are poor. Ahmad has become very afraid of being outside his home.

Many children were shot, killed or injured, some for life. Images on Palestinian TV of children dying, unprotected and defenceless, caused an uproar. One image will be forever imprinted in the minds of the children. It is that of Mohammad Al-Dorra, a boy of 12 who was exposed to shooting while huddled behind his father who tried desperately to protect his son. Mohammad died in front of the camera. The impact of that image on the minds of children was a mixture of fear, pain and powerlessness. The status of fathers was seriously undermined and children were asking their fathers "why are you not armed, father? How could you protect me without a gun?"

There is no exaggeration in saying that in the past two months, every single person in Gaza was exposed to one form of trauma or another. Children are the ultimate victims. A recent study on 121 children from the Gaza Strip found 54% of them expressing symptoms of PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, with as many as 36% of them having the problem of bedwetting.

Both Israeli and Palestinian children are being killed, injured and traumatized. The holy land is being taken over by the devil. The root of all sins is the Israeli military occupation. We know that eventually people will have to live together, but the question is how many will be killed before that happens.

I suggest that the political leaders from both sides meet the children of the other side to discover humanity.

Eyad El Sarraj, MD is the Chairman-Gaza Community Mental Health Program.

If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in the struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos.

Martin Luther King, JR.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PALESTINIAN INTIFADA

by Edmund Shehadeh

In September 2000, Al-Aqsa Intifada was ignited by the provocative visit of Ariel Sharon to Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. This Intifada caused more damage to all sectors of the Palestinian society: health, education, economy, infrastructure, etc. than the previous one. It is characterized by Israel's atrocities and appalling acts of this proportionate violence against more than three million Palestinian civilians through the brutal attacks and incursions of its obdurate military forces into the autonomous Palestinian territories.

This second uprising, known as Al-Aqsa Intifada, resulted in hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries among Palestinians, children and adults, during a relatively short period of time. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, a considerable number of the casualties suffer from loss of eyes and limbs, complicated fractures with peripheral nerve injuries, as well as head injuries. Some were left clinically dead. Many children were maimed due to bomb explosions. Palestinian protestors face the Israeli fighter planes, tanks, heavy weapons and artillery, with stones and primitive weapons. The number of deaths among Israelis has also risen due to the increased number of suicide bombings, but Palestinian deaths by far outnumber them.

The current Intifada is characterized by Israel's policy of collective punishment: curfews, closures, assassinations, house demolitions, destruction of vegetation, expulsions, annulment of Israeli citizenship, and denials of legal defense for Palestinian detainees, all of which are reprehensible steps towards criminal ethnic cleansing. This, in addition to confiscation of land and property, as well as augmentation of illegal settlement activity, was also characteristic of the previous Intifada.

As a result of the current crisis, the total losses to the Palestinian economy in terms of income, as well as private and public physical infrastructure losses are the worst in thirty years. Unemployment has tripled since the crisis began and the poverty level, originally high at one fifth of the population, has increased to sixty percent. 45.5 percent of Palestinian children suffer from anemia and chronic malnutrition.

All Palestinians are prisoners, isolated in separate cantons, unable to move, reach school/university, work or sell their crops. Their rights as human beings are profoundly violated. They are impoverished, starved, humiliated, enfeebled, tortured, bereaved and displaced without any regard for age or gender. They are easy targets for Israel's Apache gun ships, F16 fighter planes, tanks or heavy machine guns, and artillery. Medical supplies are held up and ambulances are fired at or detained. Hundreds of homes have been demolished, agricultural lands destroyed, and plantations damaged. Buildings are destroyed, offices looted, and water and electricity systems purposely destroyed in almost every Palestinian city.

A considerable number of Palestinian children and adults are showing various psychological symptoms that are causing explicit distress in their social, educational, occupation, and other important aspects of their lives. Fear, anxiety, insecurity, anger, irritability, sleeping disorders, behavioral regression, and poor performance at work and at school, result from the horrifying shelling that endangers their life and that of their loved ones. This, in addition to the socio-economic situation that prevails, and that people are going through as they try to go on with their lives.

In fact, both the Israelis and the Palestinians have suffered great wrongs at the hand of the other, albeit, in different and unequal ways. Both have legitimate grievances, fears and distrust of the other people's willingness to compromise for the sake of peace. We believe that both people have the right to live in peace with complete self-determination within international recognition of their elected leadership. It is time that this cycle of violence is put to an end. Let us pray together for a just peace to prevail in the Holy Land, the Land of the Prince of Peace.

Edmund Shehadeh is executive director: Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation.

Economic Development Under Fire

by Sam Bahour

The Palestinian economy is one of the many, but less often discussed, victims of Israeli military aggression on Palestinian towns, cities, villages and refugee camps. Before Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon was elected, the Palestinian economy was engaged in an internationally acknowledged pattern of growth. This growth started to be realized despite the fact that during the first several years after Oslo, Palestinian standard of living actually decreased because of Israeli closures and land appropriation for illegal settlement building. The Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories (UNSCO) reported, "In the spring of 2000, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Palestinian Authority (PA) Ministry of Finance projected that the Palestinian economy would continue to grow as it had since 1997 and that real growth rates for GDP and GNP for the Palestinian territories would reach 5 and 6 percent respectively." Today the Palestinian economy is in shambles.

The Intifada effects on the Palestinian population and the economy have been dramatic. By 31 December 2001, the Palestinian economy had shrunk by about one-third and average income levels declined by 30 percent (UNSCO). The proportion of the population living below the poverty line rose to close to 50 percent while unemployment levels were almost tripled reaching up to 67 percent in the Gaza Strip and 48 percent in the West Bank (PCBS). In the absence of wage employment opportunities many urban residents are in desperation, returning to agricultural production to feed their families and generate income. However, this resort is hardly viable given the rising costs of agricultural inputs and the contraction of markets.

Palestinian official sources further estimate that 66.5 percent of the Palestinian population currently lives below the poverty line (i.e. US \$2 per person/day).

Sociological polls (IUED/SDC) conducted at the height of the April-May military escalation concluded that 97 percent of Palestinians saw their living conditions dramatically decline even in comparison with the first year of Intifada. More than 55 percent of Palestinians describe their conditions as destitute.
from Status Report.

Israeli war propaganda, which the US administration has blindly adopted, proclaims that Palestinians and the Palestinian Authority initiated a campaign of terror against Israel by 'creating' the Palestinian Intifada. This myth is the most naked form of misinformation and media spin aimed to cover Israel's war crimes against Palestinian civilians. Both the numbers themselves as well as US contractors working for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which has worked side-by-side with Palestinians for years in both public and private economic sectors, can attest to the falsity of this myth.

In the midst of the current backdrop of political, economical and social chaos, it may be hard to imagine that an economic development component has remained active in the Palestinian Authority areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip throughout the past 19 months. Since Prime Minister Sharon was elected, Palestinian cities have been under a choking military and economic blockade. Domestic travel and trade have been made nearly impossible and Israeli state assassinations have had 3 million Palestinians living in constant fear. During these 19 months, over 1000 Palestinians have been killed at the hands of Israel. This latest Israeli onslaught is only another chapter in Israel's attempt to destroy the emerging State of Palestine. However, the tanks have yet to withdraw and the Israeli actions have backfired. Now the world can see what Palestinians have endured for the past thirty-five years.

The international media has so far preferred to focus on those Palestinians who have fled the indiscriminate Israeli shelling and Israeli assassination campaigns to relocate in the West or other Arab countries. However, to understand the resilience of the Palestinian community is to take a more detailed—albeit less dramatic—look at what is happening on the ground behind the bleak daily headlines.

Today, Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres, who was a leading voice promoting Palestinians to link their economy with Israel and Israeli investors, is now openly part of the Israeli leadership that is systematically destroying not only the Palestinian economy, but everything that was accomplished since Palestinian President Yasir Arafat signed on the dotted line on the White House lawn in 1993.

Any resolution to the current impasse short of a full end to all forms of the illegal Israeli occupation and the creation of a viable Palestinian state, allows Israel to maintain the faucet handles on Palestinian economic development. This time around, however, Palestinian business leaders will not have any illusions about the motivations of their Israeli neighbors.

Before relocating to Al-Bireh Palestine from Youngstown Ohio, I hung in my office a poster from an unknown author. The current business environment in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem has led me to recreate the poster and hang it once again, this time with a surreal sense of reality. It reads, "Build for Eternity and Be Ready to Move in 24 Hours."

Sam Bahour is a Palestinian-American information and communications technology consultant.

Education under occupation

by Sammy Kirreh

The Israeli practices against the Palestinian people during the Al-Aqsa Intifada have had drastic effects on education in Palestine. Schools and universities have been attacked and closed; students have been chased and arrested; the teaching process has been completely paralyzed.

Palestinian schools and universities have always been regarded by the Israeli authorities as hotbeds of resistance that harbor young activists, and thus they were constantly attacked and raided by Israeli forces. During the Israeli incursions into the Occupied Palestinian Territories, schools and universities were searched, and property, such as computers and papers, confiscated. The Israeli forces also arrested high school and university students, thus depriving them from their right to education. In addition, some school and university buildings were hit by Israeli shelling.

Talha Darwish, a senior at Bethlehem University who lives in Al-Khader village near Bethlehem describes the agony of his sons as they see Israeli soldiers raid their school in the village, "Every day my sons come back home scared and crying. They tell me about the soldiers coming into their school, beating students and arresting others. My sons do not sleep at night. My youngest son now suffers from involuntary urination."

The psychological damage of the Israeli practices on students is immeasurable. Students have lost their motivation to learn. A senior student once told me, "I just want to get my degree and get out of here. I do not care how I get it." During the final examinations some students complained, "Why do you give us exams? We could not study. Tanks surrounded our houses and were firing missiles. This is unfair."

The students' complaint was a legitimate one but their education was a responsibility that we have to do properly. In order to cope with the current political situation and offer students the best education, class periods were lengthened and the semester extended. Says Mrs. Vera Baboun, Assistant Dean of Students at Bethlehem University, "It has been a very tough academic year at Bethlehem University. Last spring semester lasted eight months, the longest in the history of the university."

As a result of the Israeli closure and partition of the Occupied Palestinian Territories into disconnected geographical entities, access to schools and higher educational institutions was almost impossible. Students and teachers underwent all kinds of humiliation by Israeli soldiers at checkpoints and were forced to return home. Those who ventured to go through dirt roads risked their lives.

Fadi Khoury, a junior at Bethlehem University, says, "I once went through "Tantur" (an Ecumenical Theological Research Center whose property straddles the checkpoint) trying to enter Bethlehem, but soldiers ran after me pointing their guns at me. They confiscated my Identity Card and detained me at Gilo checkpoint all day. I missed classes that day."

Due to the closure of the territories, the end of the high school examinations, called "Tawjihi", were interrupted in many areas. At least, 2,000 students from the West Bank could not reach their examination halls. In order to cope with this problem, the Ministry of Education has set another date for the examinations to take place.

There has been a rise in the rate of poverty among Palestinians during the Al-Aqsa Intifada. The rate of unemployment has sky-rocketed. Now many families will not be able to pay the school and university fees for their children. The Ministry of Education sent out instructions to schools exempting poor Palestinian students from tuition fees. Such a step shows the concern of Palestinians in authority for the education of the young generation.

Sammy Kirreh is a lecturer in English Literature at Bethlehem University.

Latest studies ("Education under occupation; Palestinian children talk about life and school" Save the Children, UK and Sweden, March 2002) reveal that tight internal closures have extensive negative effects on education, both in terms of quality of training and school infrastructure. Movement restrictions have reportedly obstructed school construction and hampered national training in a year when implementation of a new curriculum began. Teaching time has been significantly reduced because of sharp declines in teacher attendance. UNRWA schools in Gaza face particular difficulties, as almost 1,000 of the Agency's education personnel live in the intermittently isolated southern regions of the Strip.

The school drop-out rates that had been on the rise throughout the West Bank and Gaza since the early month of Intifada are now believed to be stabilizing. In certain areas of the West Bank the drop-out has even fallen, as "children who dropped out of school to enter the labour market may be returning to school as a consequence of mass unemployment". *from Status Rep*

The agricultural sector that relies on the Israeli and European markets for its exports (according to FAO, Israel is virtually the sole supplier of food to the West Bank and Gaza, accounting for 95% of total agricultural imports and almost 100% of exports) is now practically paralysed. The inaccessibility of market outlets and the impossibility of exports accompanied by a considerable decline in the overall price level for the agricultural produce altogether create a major disincentive for the farmers. In addition, the cultivated land area continues to shrink: e.g. in the Gaza Strip some 22,545 (PA Ministry of Agriculture, Gaza) dunums of agricultural land in the Strip have been leveled since the beginning of the Intifada. In total some 50,671 (PA Ministry of Agriculture—The Palestinian Agricultural Sector Losses, July 2002) dunums of agricultural land have been destroyed and alienated in the West Bank and Gaza. *From Status Report*

Closure Impact on Farmers

by Diane Roe

On June 24, 2002 the Israeli military declared curfew and strict closure for Palestinians throughout the West Bank. At the Tarqumia checkpoint during the next five days, 12 truckloads of plums rotted in the hot sun because the soldiers would not let them pass to market. More than half of these were from the village of Beit Ummar. During that time tons more of the crop of plums fell from the trees as farmers were prevented from reaching their fields.

On Tuesday, July 9, during a lifting of the curfew, Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) and four Americans with ISM (International Solidarity Movement) accompanied farmers hoping to harvest their remaining plums. An Israeli soldier and an armed Israeli settler told the farmers and the internationals that the land was a closed military zone and that they must leave.

During a meeting that afternoon with representatives of the municipality of Beit Ummar and the internationals, one of the farmers, Mohammed Slebi, told CPT that he had tried to get permission to go to his land. He had gone to the District Coordinating Office (DCO) a body set up under the Oslo agreements with both Israeli and Palestinian liaisons. He found that there was no longer a Palestinian representative.

What recourse do the farmers have? Slebi was told he could go to the military commander at Kiryat Arba, a Jewish-only settlement outside of Hebron. When he telephoned there, he was told to travel to Kiryat Arba in person to apply for a permit. If he was granted the permit, he might be able to go to his land one day a week only during the noon hour. Even applying for the permit is impossible. He is not allowed on the roads that go to Kiryat Arba even when the curfew is lifted. "What can I do when the judge is my enemy?" Slebi asked members of CPT.

Now in late August the farmers of Beit Ummar are ready for the grape harvest. Those whose land is within the closed military zone are still denied access to their land. The grape yield from this land is expected to be 1500 tons. Even if they are able to harvest, curfew and closure will restrict marketing. Thousands more tons in the land outside the closed military zone may not make it to market.

Dianne Roe is a member of the Christian Peacemaker Teams in Beit Ummar. Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) is inviting internationals to join in an advocacy campaign for farmers. For more information go to the CPT website (www.cpt.org) or contact Rich Meyer (cptcsd@npcc.net).



[In March and April 2002 Israel reoccupied] major Palestinian cities, refugee camps, towns and some villages in the West Bank. The already severely restricted movement of persons and goods is transformed into curfews, directly affecting over 600,000 persons; full implementation of "back-to-back" system for transport of goods across the Green Line as well as between cities in the West Bank; major access restrictions on relief operators and significant infrastructure and asset damage to Palestinian service providers; progressive isolation of rural communities. from Status Report

Our Daily Suffering at the Israeli Checkpoints

by Ibrahim Allam

Over the past few months, every city on the West Bank has become a separate canton with borders between them similar to those that separate one country from another. Reaching my workplace in Bethlehem is like crossing a minefield. Every day I have to take a separate route, depending on the orders issued by the Israeli armed forces.

At the beginning of this siege, I thought that crossing on foot over the rugged terrain full of rocks and holes, was hard work compared to the asphalt main road that joins Qalandia (where the main Israeli checkpoint is stationed) to Al-Ram (a Palestinian neighborhood outside Jerusalem). I now find myself wishing that that road was still open despite its difficulty and length. What happened is that the Israeli soldiers in charge of guarding the Qalandia checkpoint closed it off. I wondered then which road I would take to get to my workplace at Bethlehem University

I later found out that the road through Rafat (a Palestinian village near Ramallah) was open. A number of us took a car to the point where we would have to get out and walk, only to find that that road was also closed. Across the road was an army tank ready to shoot at anyone attempting to go through. We had no choice but



to get back into the car and return to where we had started.

The next day, a car took us through a bumpy road that went past some Israeli settlements which meant that we were in danger all the while. I prayed to God, all along that we would pass in peace and not encounter another Israeli patrol that would make us stand in the sun for several hours – as was their custom – before sending us back to where we had started.

I should mention that this road goes up a very steep hill, where all the passengers have to get out of the car and help push it up the hill. Now this was a dirt road and as we walked behind the car pushing it, a cloud of dust engulfed us and blew into our eyes and throat, making it very difficult for those of us who are older people, to breathe.

This new, and almost impossible way, was also closed off by the Israeli army. My only choice left was to rent out a place in Bethlehem to stay in, away from my home and family. This was my only solution if I was to carry on with my work. So this I did, which means I have to spend a considerable amount of my salary for rent. My suffering has now become financial as well as physical for this has affected my daily bread.

Living in Bethlehem is not without considerable difficulty. We spend several days in a row every week under a round-the-clock curfew. Very often, I have to do with only one meal a day to allow the little amount of food left, to stretch as long as possible. We can never predict how long the curfew will last.

This is only a glimpse of the story of my suffering together with my compatriots, the Palestinian people. I record it as a form of witness, as well as for the sake of posterity.

Dr. Ibrahim Allam is a lecturer at Bethlehem University who lives in Ramallah and is a member of St. Andrews Episcopal Church

WHEN THE CURF

Today I was a witness to a harrowing experience on the Birzeit-Ramallah road - an experience that buttressed my conviction of the immorality of the Israeli occupation and the inhumanity of its army.

After frustratingly waiting for days on end, I set off from my home in Birzeit heading towards Ramallah seven kilometers away. I planned to visit my ninety year old mother and my sister, something I did almost daily before the recent Israeli army incursions in the area. The ensuing state of blanket curfews on Ramallah have made it impossible for me to go and see them for the past few weeks. Today the curfew was to be lifted from 9 a.m. until 2 p.m. and this was an opportunity for me to visit them as usual.

But it was not as simple as that! We are under siege and before heading for Ramallah I made sure to ask about the situation on the road. I was assured that it was safe. The soldiers manning the military check post, usually prohibiting or supervising passage, were gone. It was a signal that one could go without the hazards and intimidations, although cement blocks remained in place and as usual, preventing cars from passing. The only way to get to Ramallah was to walk part of the way through the check post area - a distance of about one kilometer.

I joined the walking crowd. There was close to what one might call a normal cross traffic flow on that hot summer morning from Birzeit to Ramallah and the other way round. Birzeit is

almost a suburb of Ramallah, the big city, where most services are available and where one can resume contact with the energy of activities and encounters. So it was with excitement yet cautious anxiety that most of us took to the road. We were happy at the chance of living once again, an ordinary day, taking a familiar route. After living the stagnation and prison-like conditions of the past few weeks, there was a sigh of relief on everyone's lips and a reluctant hope in the heart.

Hurriedly we moved along, aware of precious time. The hours will pass quickly and the curfew will be back in no time. Apprehensively and with a light gait we set off to visit relatives and friends, keep appointments, shop at favorite stores or simply enjoy a casual walk downtown. Likewise, there was the crowd from Ramallah, mostly students, faculty and staff of Birzeit University, heading for their campus in the town of Birzeit. Foremost on their minds was the need for the resumption of the much interrupted academic life, finishing the semester for some and graduation and celebration for others. Watching the young people, I felt the vibrant energy of youth, the determination to go on regardless of hardships, and of a life edging on despair. Their resilience is contagious. We have a future to live for, I remind myself. I reached Ramallah almost forgetting the perils of our days.

I visited my mother and enjoyed

the reunion with her and my sister. My mother smiled doubtfully when I promised her a daily visit like before. She knows how difficult it is to keep such promises under the prevalent conditions.

Sadly the time passed quickly and it was getting close to 1 p.m. The hours of freedom have almost come to an end. I had to hasten and leave before the curfew is re-imposed at 2 p.m. Once more I found myself part of the milling crowd, returning with heavy hearts. The excitement of the morning hours was almost gone, the optimism reduced as we got closer to the check post area - a tangible reminder that we are under occupation and that our lives are monitored by the dictates of curfews and siege. We moved along, burdened, but at least relieved that the passage seemed smooth.

How terribly mistaken we were! Suddenly from around the bend an army jeep appeared, speeding crazily through the peaceful crowd. Instantly the quiet road became almost like a battlefield. There were intangible ferocious sounds coming from the chasing jeep - words and orders that no one seemed able to understand. All I knew was

FEW IS LIFTED

by Tania Nasir

that we were being chased and dispersed and that there was panic and fear on the faces of all around me. Hundreds like me were running, scared and wondering what was happening; men carrying goods, women with shopping bags, their children confused, traumatized, clutching at their mothers' skirts, others holding babies or trying to push prams, students with books, old people pleading for someone to guide them along. All were desperately trying to avoid confrontation with this solitary army jeep, zigzagging its way in all directions, seeking innocent victims like a demented ogre on the loose. We ran. Some took to the nearby rocky terraced hills, others took refuge in the vineyards and fruit orchards below, and some like me opted to remain on the main road. All the time, gas bombs hurled from the jeep were chasing us like vultures hunting their prey. The tender loving landscape was transformed to the ugliness of fear and rage.

Heart beating, muscles aching, I ran for dear life. Why this all of a sudden? We had left our homes this morning without the presence

of a manned check post, and now we are faced with the threatening presence of soldiers. Was this perhaps a trick of the army to remove check posts and then whimsically reinstall them and thus trap us like now creating this horrific pandemonium? Maybe far-fetched, but reminiscent thoughts of the horrors of the Kufr Qassem massacre, years ago, came to my mind. I could not help but painfully remember the bloody events of that day when farmers of this northern Palestinian village were returning home after a long day in the fields, not knowing that a curfew was imposed on their village by the Israeli army. Without any warning they were shot in cold blood as they approached their homes in the evening. Could something like this happen again? Scared more than ever before, I kept on running.

The road is uphill. I struggled amongst the scrambling crowd, the unbearable heat suffocating me. The contemptible military jeep, that khaki green object of terror and intimidation, screeched to a halt next to me. I saw a soldier jumping down, nervously, threateningly waving a grenade in his hand. I wanted to scream at him, but fear got the better of me and I continued running. A young woman pulled me ahead, warning me that the soldier is about to throw the grenade. I ducked as I heard the explosion behind me and I choked on the poisonous gas.

I was coughing and running, coughing and running I desperately needed water, my throat was on fire and dry as sun-scorched earth but I kept on running, fleeing, until after what seemed like an eternity, I stumbled into the safety of a passing car that took me home. Behind me the madness continued.

I am overwhelmed by this experience and I desperately seek an explanation. More than the physical pain and terror that I have experienced, I am angry and humiliated by the arrogance, the immorality, the inhumanity of the insolent power of Israel. This traumatic incident that I was a part of, happens almost everyday, everywhere in Palestine. The injustice is unbearable. I try to recapture what really happened today. There was no provocation. There was no threat. There was no danger to the security of Israel. To me, the only explanation to what happened was that we, simple and ordinary civilians, dared to go on with our lives as ordinary human beings do everywhere else in the world. Yes, despite thirty five years of occupation and despite attempts by Israel to crush us as a people and as a society, our only crime is that we dared to be ordinary citizens, living ordinary lives in our ordinary land.

Sadly, knowingly, I remember the poignant words of our renowned Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, "...we do not seek to be victims nor do we seek to be heroes. All that we want is to be ORDINARY."

Tania Nasir is a Palestinian classical singer with a long history of involvement in cultural activities and the arts. Co-author: Fallahi Cross-Stitch (1996) and editor of Spring is Here: Embroidered Flowers of the Palestinian Spring (2002).

But these are not normal times

by Samia Khoury

In normal times when someone dies in our country, the funeral takes place within twenty four hours, and there is an obituary in the local papers which specifies the time of the funeral and the days on which the family receives condolences.

In normal times wedding cards are sent ahead of time, so one can plan to attend.

In normal times many organizations have summer programs, camps for children and youth, and fun days.

And in normal times people do take a vacation from work every year.

But then these are not normal times. No matter how much one tries to plan, nothing seems to work out. Under the curfew, life is simply on hold, and I mean literally on hold. And under occupation even your dreams are on hold. A simple plan for a vacation becomes an ordeal these days since travel via the airport is not allowed for the residents of the West Bank and Gaza. And to try crossing the Allenby bridge is almost mission impossible when people need to spend two to three nights sleeping in Jericho before being able to cross the bridge to travel via Jordan. The vacation becomes as much of an ordeal as the occupation itself. So one is better off at home.

The Fun-Day for the children of Ramallah planned by the Sakakini Cultural Centre had been rescheduled a number of times. Finally the new announcement simply stated that the program will take place on the first day the curfew is lifted. And it did finally take place and there was a good turn out. The children are in dire need of fun in between

closures, curfews and incursions. A friend of mine in Nablus called to say that they simply took to the streets defying orders after eight days of complete curfew. The children were making percussion music with the spoons and empty plates to express their need for basic food. But of course they paid a heavy price for that taste of freedom for a short while when the Israeli occupying forces stormed into Nablus the very next day wreaking havoc everywhere and destroying the historic old part of the city and completely devastating every aspect of life.

Munir, the son of a friend of ours died in Bethlehem two months ago. There was no announcement about the funeral because nobody knew when it would take place, which eventually was four days later. But the family announced that they would receive condolences whenever the curfew was lifted. The funeral of Fatimah, an activist friend of ours met the same fate in Ramallah at about the same time.

Wedding invitations these days have no specific date but an hour and place on the first day the curfew is lifted. A friend of mine was telling me about a wedding in Ramallah which was supposed to take place at 12:00 noon on the day the curfew was lifted. Upon hearing that the curfew was going to be imposed again an hour earlier than originally scheduled, the wedding entourage rushed to the church. Of course most of the guests could not make it on time, but what mattered really was to get the formalities over with, before the curfew was on again at 1:00. We were at a funeral service at 10:00 a.m. in Beit Jala a few weeks ago, and before we were out of the church, the flower stands were being rushed in for the wedding that was to take place shortly after so that the ceremony could take place before the curfew is imposed again at noon. The people attending both occasions would hardly have had time to go home to change from their mourning attire to something brighter for the wedding.

The invitation to the wedding of Amal, the daughter of Emile and Hana Ashrawi was one of the last wedding invitations which we received from Ramallah that had a specific date and it did take place on schedule. But of course because of checkpoints and borders we could not go, yet I did send them a gift with my friend Cedar who happened to be in Jerusalem and who lives in the same neighborhood in Ramallah. Little did I know that the vase which I chose as a symbolic gift from the Palestinian Potter Factory in Jerusalem was almost going to cost Amal, Cedar's daughter, her life. Amal had volunteered to deliver the gift once the curfew was lifted. With package in hand she headed towards the Ashrawi residence, but to her surprise there was a big Israeli army tank blocking the entrance. She stepped off the pavement and walked towards the tank intending to go around it and into the house. To her horror, the tank gun swung around and pointed its gaping mouth at her. Apparently she looked suspicious with her mysterious package. She stood in the middle of the road, terrified and frozen, searching for a human face, to show up from this monster, with which she could communicate. But it simply was a faceless terrorizing object. Then out of nowhere, there was a car honk, which made Amal jump out of her wits almost dropping the package. It turned out to be the Ashrawi car which had come in time to rescue her. She was glad to see Hanan and with no further ado she delivered the package and was on her heels back home before the curfew was reimposed.

Samia Khoury is a Sabeel board member

DEATH UNDER OCCUPATION

by Rima Tarazi

Everything was still in Ramallah, adding to the dignity of sorrow that permeated the souls of so many people as they learnt of the passing away of a distinguished Palestinian woman, a friend, a colleague, a mentor and a staunch advocate of the voiceless and oppressed.

Fatmeh Jibril was Vice President of the Board of the General Union of Palestinian Women, and a member of several other voluntary societies. She passed away alone with no family around, in a hospital in Ramallah, during a period of curfew and siege which were imposed on the town and most Palestinian towns, by the Israeli occupation army. Hundreds of those who had wanted to pay tribute to her life and dedication, from all parts of Palestine, were confined to their homes by military orders. Her body waited unceremoniously in the hospital morgue until "further notice" Announcements for the funeral, relayed by phone, or available newspapers, specified that the funeral would take place the day the curfew is lifted! Indeed, an undeserving end to a rich life of service and commitment.

Two days later, the curfew was lifted between 9:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m., hardly sufficient time to bid the deceased farewell and to accompany her body to the Mosque and her final resting place, robbing her friends and loved ones the respite of the traditional mourning ceremonies befitting a cherished human being and a woman of her status.

Death is the unquestioned will of God which no one can escape, but death under the oppressive measures of military occupation is a tragedy which we pray God will spare us.

*Rima Tarazi, President of the
Board, General Union
of Palestinian
Women.*

Nonviolence is not a garment to be put on and off at will. Its seat is in the heart and it must be an inseparable part of our very being.

Mohandas Gandhi

THE DEAD CANNOT BE BURIED

by George Sahhar

while Bethlehem was under curfew on April 7, 2002, Osama, 26 years old, died of cancer. St. Catherine's Church was inaccessible and there was no chance for holding a decent burial for him. From across the street, the Bethlehem University guards offered to make a casket for him, and they managed to find some old pieces of wood. However, the Mayor of Bethlehem intervened, and he managed to have a casket delivered by ambulance. Still, it was not possible to take the late Osama to Church, so he was brought to the Bethlehem University Chapel, taking the risk of crossing the street under curfew. Finally, Osama was buried in the Crypt of the De La Salle Christian Brothers, under the University Library, and not in the Catholic cemetery where he was supposed to rest in peace.

George Sahhar is Director of Communications at Bethlehem University and a member of the Sabeel board.

In peace the sons bury their fathers
and in war the fathers bury their sons.

Francis Bacon

Every gun that is made,
every warship launched,
every rocket fired signifies,
in the final sense,
a theft from those who hunger and are not fed,
those who are cold and are not clothed.

Dwight D. Eisenhower

Illegal in his own country

by Nevart Ateek

Immediately after the six-day war, Israel extended its law over Arab East Jerusalem, thus annexing "not only the five square kilometers of Arab East Jerusalem – but also 65 square kilometers of surrounding open country and villages, most of which never had any municipal link to Jerusalem. Overnight they became part of Israel's eternal and indivisible capital" Allan Brownfeld in "The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs", May 2000. The people of Jerusalem, Palestinians, who had lived there for hundreds of years were treated as aliens and granted the status of permanent residents – not citizens – liable to lose their residency rights if they live outside of Jerusalem for 70 more years.

Our neighbor was recently forced to leave his own country after being accused of being an illegal resident. He was born in East Jerusalem but his family left to the Gulf when he was a baby, right before the 1967 war broke out. After a few years, when they decided to return to their home country, the Israeli Authorities refused them the right of return. They applied for family reunification, which allows them to reunite with the rest of their family in Palestine, which had never left. However, the application was denied. Although they were able to return for short visits, they were never allowed back to live in Jerusalem, and so in the 1980's, the family resided in Jordan.

In 1990, our neighbor got married to his cousin, who lived in Jerusalem, but since he was not able to come back home, the couple decided to move to the Gulf. In the mean time, our neighbor kept reapplying for family reunification, but the approval was never granted. In 1996, his wife came back to Jerusalem in order to give birth to their first child. Upon her arrival, the Israeli Authorities told her that due to her long absence from the country, her Jerusalem Identity Card (ID) was cancelled. She was still able to use it while crossing checkpoints, however, when it came to important things such as getting a birth certificate for her newborn daughter, it was useless. She was told that in order to retain her Jerusalem ID she had to reside in Jerusalem. Her husband then got a three-month visa that allowed him to visit Jerusalem as a tourist. By moving back to Jerusalem, they gave up everything, leaving behind their jobs and home in the Gulf. The struggle to get the wife's ID back lasted from 1996 until 2001, when she finally got it, which automatically got their daughter an ID as well.

In 2001, the husband finally received approval to begin the process of becoming a permanent resident, and he got a visa to stay in Jerusalem for one year. When the time came to renew it, the Israeli Ministry of Interior refused to do so. He was back to square one, and between January and July 2002, he continued to live in Jerusalem "illegally". Throughout all of this, the family lawyer was still working on completing the process. In July 2002, he received a notice from the Ministry of Interior denying him the right to reside in Jerusalem. He was summoned to the Russian Compound, which is an Israeli interrogation and detention center. They gave him the option of either leaving the country, or going to jail, leaving his family to continue the process on his behalf. He decided to leave, because the Russian Compound is known to be a place of extreme humiliation and abuse. The police and army accompanied him to his home, where his wife was told to prepare a bag for him. His family reacted harshly, and they in turn convinced him to stay in the country, until the hearing in court. The soldiers were very rough when attempting to break up the crowd that had gathered to try and protect our neighbor. The soldiers almost hit our neighbor's uncle, and they were close to throwing tear gas. Our neighbor's wife panicked as she took her 6-year-old daughter and 6-month-old twin babies to our other neighbor's house, in an attempt to protect them.

Our neighbor remained in jail for a week, while the court hearing date was set. Unfortunately, the result was negative, and he was again given the choice of either going to jail or leaving the country. His family decided that he should leave, because he has health problems, which would not permit him to remain in such a place where the treatment is horrible. It was obvious that the process would take a very long time if not for ever. So he left, and his wife and other family members are now struggling to gain his right of return.

How much more of this can our Palestinian people take? Everyday, families such as this are being torn apart, and only God knows when they will be reunited permanently! A husband/father is in Jordan, while his wife and three children are here, living in pain. Luckily his children are too young to understand exactly what's happening, however, they won't be young forever! One day, very soon, they will realize the true reason behind their father's absence, but by then it will be too late, because he would have already missed a big part of their lives, and this void can't be filled by anyone other than their beloved father.

Thousands of Jerusalemites have met the same fate over the thirty-five years of Israel's occupation of the city.

Nevart Ateek is a seventeen-year-old volunteer at Sabeel, who has just recently graduated from the Anglican International School in Jerusalem.

The West Bank and the Gaza Strip have been under internal closures and a tight siege since September 2000. This has fragmented them into separate cantons, which makes movement from one town or village to another, almost impossible, and dangerous. The city of Nablus, situated in the center of the West Bank is one of the worst hit places in every way.

Nablus is an important commercial center because of its central situation. The whole surrounding rural district is dependent on the city for crucial services. Commuting to and from Nablus has now become very dangerous because of the Israeli army checkpoints and Jewish settlers who control the roads and intersections, in order to protect their illegal settlements. Basic foodstuffs, fuel and other vital commodities have quite often been prevented from reaching the people of Nablus and its surroundings for long stretches of time. Furthermore, the Israeli army controls all the hilltops making it impossible for the villagers to take alternate routes..

Life in Nablus

by Fr. Yousef Sa'adeh

Nablus is a city of about a hundred and thirty thousand people with a soaring unemployment rate that exceeds 65 percent. The economic situation there is on the verge of total collapse and starvation, except for the relief work carried out by different relief agencies. Even people who depend on regular monthly salaries are not being paid regularly for lack of funds.

The social and economic problems are caused by:

1. the continuous closures and curfews imposed on the city and surrounding area, which has now been going on for three months with only a few occasional hours of relief.

2. unemployment, caused by the closures and curfews, is producing widespread poverty to the extent where many families lack basic foodstuffs and commodities and have to depend on handouts from better off friends and relatives or from charities.

3. the deteriorating standard of health services which is on the verge of a catastrophe. Malnutrition is spreading especially among children. Child vaccination has been disrupted due to difficulty in reaching hospitals and health centers and the lack of sufficient vaccines. Another health problem is the rise in the rate of stress related diseases, heart attacks and strokes, as well as various psychological problems.

4. tension and psychological problems: in this sphere one could observe a phenomenon worth taking notice of. Signs of psychological pressure

are showing in social and family relationships. Family in-fighting as well as among neighbors and people in general are being blown out of proportion, leading sometimes to violence and physical harm.

5. trauma among children: children are the worst hit victims. Their lives have been made miserable and exposed to danger. They have been robbed of their childhood and many talk about death being more merciful than life. Their daily reality is one of deprivation, dominated by the sound of gunfire, tank shelling, gun ships, demolition of homes, violence and death.

The general situation in the city:

After the April 2002 Israeli incursion, the old city of Nablus was left in ruins. This part of town had historic buildings, very old churches and mosques, a unique Turkish public bath and very old private homes. Almost all of those were partially or totally destroyed.

The whole town looks like it has been hit by an earthquake. The Nablus municipality tries its best as it can to deal with the problems and keep the services running despite the fact that people have not been able to pay their electricity and water bills for months, let alone their municipal taxes. Public buildings, hospitals and private homes badly need repair before the rainy season comes in. Many people have not been able to pay the rent for their homes or business places. A big number of them are day laborers or farmers who cannot reach their places of work or their orchards where the produce has just been left to rot.

Abuna Yousef Sa'adeh is a Melkite parish priest in Nablus

A VOICE FROM THE OLD CITY IN NABLUS

Telephone interview by Nora Carmi

Um 'Ala and her family of five live in a one-room house in Hay al Yasmina (the Jasmin Quarter) of the Old City of Nablus. There are cracks and fissures in the wall caused by the repeated Israeli shelling, and she does not think their house will be able to stand the harsh winter rain and cold, but she says, "we are luckier than others, we have a roof over our head", as two of their neighbors had their homes totally demolished. Her husband has been jobless for the past three years, and her two sons, 20 and 18, left school after the 10th grade in order to support the family. Today the breadwinner is the oldest son who brings in a monthly 750 NIS (about \$130) from his work with the Medical Relief Committees. During these last incursions, both sons volunteered with the various medical teams, assisting the injured when ambulances were prevented from reaching the disaster area. The oldest was recently shot, the bullet resting in his waist, right below his Red-Crescent vest. Both young men have also been held and beaten several times by the soldiers. Rana, her daughter, who stopped school at sixth grade, has machine-knitting skills, but also no work as who can afford clothes now?

" The following is a telephone interview with Um 'Ala who spoke of the situation in Nablus in general and on behalf of all in Hay al Yasmina:

This is the 61st day of curfew since the incursion in April. Today the curfew was lifted for three hours and everybody rushed out to buy some food. Though provisions are rare and money is scarce, people still go out to see their neighbors and congratulate them on their safety. It can be several days or weeks before we are allowed out again. Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails have a daily walk "fora" in a restricted area; the Old City of Nablus has become our prison but we are not even allowed our daily walk.

Surviving has become a challenge says Um 'Ala' and we women have found ways to do so. We try to keep our spirits high for the sake of our husbands and children. The help we used to get from our better-off relatives in other parts of the city, has now stopped.

In our quarter, we created our own system of communal help. I had a sack of flour that I opened up and placed under a staircase for all my neighbors to use. Bread (when we manage to bake) and boiled rice have become our main meals for days. We shared cooking gas and when there were no more gas cylinders, we went back to the primitive kerosene primus, and when we ran out of fuel, we kindled a fire. To save precious time, one oven was put at the disposal of all and the women work in teams to bake bread or cook for their neighbors, if and when they can.

We live in a state of anxiety and constant fear. At night we cannot sleep from the airplanes and tanks, and during the day, we fear the house searches and our children being imprisoned. When the children in the neighborhood dare break the curfew and go out and play among the rubble and garbage- their only play ground nowadays- we are afraid that they may be blown up if they come in contact with mines or explosive objects left behind by the Israeli soldiers. Our children have lost their innocent childhood. They are afraid to go to school. Even schools have not been spared in the Old City and the children are afraid that they will be killed. In addition to all the trauma that they have experienced in the past months, now we face this new fear of going back to school.

Our house chores remain unfinished because of the presence of all the family at home or because we have to rush out for refuge when the shelling starts. A few days ago, I was making dough when the shooting started. Another time, I did not have the time to turn off the stove and the cooking pot and its contents burnt. We lost the meal and the utensil, and everyone was angry! Unfortunately, the bottled up frustration of helplessness and despair is vented on family members and loved ones imprisoned together for long periods...

A car cannot run without fuel, and human beings cannot stand steadfast without financial assistance and moral support.

We can go without food for days, but we cannot remain under occupation and oppression.

Our destroyed homes need to be repaired, but the local municipality cannot meet the needs of so many damaged homes and burst pipes. Removing the rubble and the stench of blood is, in itself, an ordeal.

Why are we Palestinians denied the right to live decently and in dignity? Our neighbor's daughter Tahani as-Sarawat sat for the Tawjihi and came out first in all the West Bank with an average of 98.7%, even though she had to study under these difficult conditions. Is there anybody who can help her continue her studies? Her father is handicapped, and there are eight children at home. We, Palestinian women are ready to endure the situation if there is a just solution at the end. Our struggle for independence and liberty is not over, and I believe we have gone two-thirds of the way. Help us remain resilient and live to see our independence. I have been writing down the facts of the past months with some of the women in the quarter, lest history once more forgets the just cause of Palestine.

Please come and visit us. It is true that we have no furniture for you to sit on, 'we are on the bare tiles' but there is always room in our hearts for those who stand for justice."

Nora Carmi is coordinator of Women's Programs in the Local Department.

Snapshots of Our Activities

The summer has been a very hot one indeed. Not only did the atmospheric temperatures soar to suffocating 37-40°C for weeks, but the political heat reached the boiling point too. Repeated incursions, re-occupation by rumbling tanks and roaring airplanes caused havoc to the already ravaged infrastructure of Palestinian towns, villages, escalating the sequel of reprisals and bomb responses, and raising the death toll in an endless cycle of violence.

Amidst the chaos, Sabeel's ministry trudges on slightly injured, but alive. Through monthly public lectures, new books and papers, Sabeel continues to bring awareness about current issues of concern among the community, indirectly encouraging more people to work for a just peace.

Community-Building

In the abyss of despair and hopelessness appeared the long-awaited Arabic version of "Justice and only Justice" entitled "The Struggle for Justice". At the launching of the book in Jerusalem on June 10, the absence of West Bankers under siege was widely felt.

An eager audience 'welcomed' the book in Nazareth on July 3, pleased to explore Palestinian Liberation Theology in their mother tongue.

The launching of the book in Amman, Jordan on July 12 was postponed until easier travel and cooler weather conditions allow it.

* The Palestinian National Initiative "Al-Mubadara"

On July 30, Ibrahim Dakkak, architect and active community builder, presented the Palestinian National Initiative to a Jerusalem audience. Initiated by Dr. Haidar Abdel Shafi, Dr. Mustapha Barghouti and Ibrahim Dakkak himself, the initiative is a vision, for all Palestinian citizens to actively participate in rebuilding society. The authors have identified the areas that need reform mainly the judicial, financial and economical fields, as well as civic education. But the initiative does not offer a secret formula for solutions. It is the task of the

civil society with its NGOs, CROs and institutions to implement the proposed agenda. (For details visit www.almubadara.org).

* Suicide-Bombers ... a Palestinian Christian view

The 18- page paper written by the Rev. Dr. Naji Ateek is an honest reflection about this new phenomenon in the Palestinian society. On August 7, it was presented to the expatriate community in Jerusalem, who encouraged the publication of this paper.

The full text appeared recently in a special issue of Cornerstone and is available on our website www.sabeel.org.

* Journey into the Past

For 2 captivating hours, William Dalrymple, the author of "From the Holy Mountain" (1994) guided a mesmerized audience on August 22 into the heart of desert monasteries. The audience traveled through picture slides of remaining Christian footholds in the Middle East in the footsteps of John-Moscus and his apprentice Sophronius in the fifth century, a journey that Dalrymple traces in his book in a vivid, colorful account not void of humor and charm.

Speakers Training Course

The need to train a team of Palestinian Christian speakers has been high on Sabeel's list of priorities for some time, since the last course was held in 1994 at the peak of tourism and pilgrimage. The actual eight-week Speakers Training Course that started on August 1, is limited to participants from the Jerusalem area, for obvious reasons! The twenty-four students include travel agents, guides and employees of diplomatic agencies, doctors, teachers and Sabeel staff. The topics covered were the historical and theological backgrounds of the Palestinian\Israeli conflict, the religious and political obstacles to peace, "facts on the ground" such as settlements, the effects of the Intifada on all aspects of life, non-violence and a vision for the future. The challenge is not to lose hope in "a miracle" for a just peace that can only be achieved with the end of the occupation.



Ongoing **local activities** continue with last-minute changes in plans depending on the political situation.

* **Clergy Programs** are still limited to the Jerusalem area because of curfews and the siege on the West Bank. Sadly enough Friday, the day chosen unanimously for clergy meetings is almost impenetrable for West Bankers.

At the July 5, informal gathering, Father Pakrad Bourjikian from the Armenian Patriarchate conducted the Bible study. The discussion later centered on future programs, the possibility of a trip in the "Footsteps of St. Paul" and ways to widen the brotherly relations in the region. Current issues, outreach to needy families and education were high on the agenda.

The first meeting after the summer vacation was held on September 6.

* **Women's programs**

August is the season when the Virgin Mary, mother of Christ is at the center of our Women's Programs.

Fifty women participated in the spiritual/recreational trip to Ein Karem on June 29. Together with the Rev. Naim Ateek, they re-read the Magnificat of Mary and revisited the sites traditionally connected with the young girl whose role and stature is venerated in

church tradition. On the way to Ein Karem the group of Palestinian women stopped at Lifta, reliving their history of dispossession amidst the ruins of this picturesque village engulfed by the encroaching monstrous settlements. The Sisters of Sion convent in Ein Karem is a remarkable site for retreat and spiritual empowerment, and their simple meal baked in garden herbs is both refreshing and healthy.

To balance the spirituality and to relate it to reality, Hind Khoury, a Board member and a financial consultant presented the results of the Multi-Sector Review Program on the economic conditions in East Jerusalem. Though the picture is grim, the situation can be remedied, and the role of women should not be underestimated. Simple actions repeatedly emphasized to improve social and political conditions will eventually yield fruits, if properly organized.



The Sabeel series of panel discussions about "The Virgin Mary: Spirituality and Tradition" coincides with the celebrations commemorating the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in August. In the first session held on August 14, Father Rafiq Khoury and Father Maroutha presented the Roman Catholic and Syrian Orthodox perspectives. On September 4, The Greek Orthodox and Coptic Churches represented by Archmandrite Atallah Hanna and Deacon Majdi Yaquin introduced their church traditions.



* Youth

Though political obstacles may hinder his task, George Manarous, Sabeel's new Youth Coordinator, is determined to revive youth work in Jerusalem, the Galilee, the West Bank and beyond. Fifty young people attended the acquaintance gathering/dinner at Sabeel on September 5.

Eliane Abdinnour, is the project coordinator of a pilot Youth Leadership Training Program that will enable actual and potential leaders of the 13 existing church-related youth groups in Jerusalem upgrade their leadership skills in order to uplift their own youth groups. Topics will include leadership based on Christ our model, principles of management, teamwork, and skills of effective communication.



Youth



Among **International activities**, several church groups, fact-finding delegations, film crews and individuals from the USA and Europe including the Jesse Jackson Group and congressional staffers, met with Sabeel members. Sabeel encourages other churches to follow the example of daring advocates in the Methodist, Presbyterian, UCC and Catholic Churches, who did not shy away from visiting us during these hard times. Cathy Nichols, the UCC mission

personnel continues to train GIPP groups as they arrive in the country to show solidarity and to support the victims of occupation. Cathy coaches in non-violent activism rules and regulations.



The Sabeel family offers congratulations to Cathy and Dr. Asher Kaufman who tied the marital knots on September 28 in Tucson, Arizona. Janet Lahr Lewis, Coordinator of International Friends of Sabeel has started sending out monthly IFOS E-news leaflet. Two issues are in circulation.

Janet will be joining the Rev. Naim Ateek in two upcoming conferences on Christian Zionism to be held in England Sept 18/19, and in Norway on October 12-13. These are preambles to a wider international conference on Christian Zionism to be held in Jerusalem April 14-18 2004.

The dates for the next Solidarity Visit to Palestine/Israel are March 27-April 3, 2002. Mark your agendas and book your tickets now...

Two new volunteers have joined Sabeel: Henry Longbottom from CMS\England working on legal research and assisting in the Speakers training Course, and Hanna Lagerlof, from Sweden helping with Swedish projects.

News from Nazareth

Thirty-six Sabeelers and friends from Nazareth and Haifa undertook a pilgrimage to Jerusalem on July 6-7. The evening meal and gathering in the garden of the Sabeel center was, for many newcomers the first visit and introduction to the work of Sabeel. The group who chose to stay at the Knight's Palace within the old city walls prayed on Sunday at the Ecce Homo with the Rev. Naim Ateek, then discovered Jerusalem through the eyes of Albert Aghazarian. Lunch was at the Maronite Convent and Anton Farah, their guide from the Galilee concluded visits to the Holy Sites.

* Clergy

The first Nazareth Clergy meeting on August 3 resulted in designating the areas of concern: working with young couples, youth, (start a leadership course), and the training of Sunday-school teachers.

* Where to...?

Following upon the series looking into the future entitled "Where to", Mgr. Boulos Marcuzzo, the Patriarchal Vicar in Israel addressed a selected round-table audience of 30 people to discuss "the Role of Christians in society and their Christian identity"

Dear God
with you everything is possible.
Let the cup of war,
killing and destruction,
the cup of bloodshed,
human anguish and desolation,
the cup of torture,
breakage in human relationships and
abandonment...
Dear God,
Let this cup pass us by.
We are afraid.
We are trembling in the depths of our being.
we feel the sweat and tears
of thousands of people all over the world.
People who are afraid-
afraid to fight,
afraid to kill,
afraid of being killed,
afraid of an uncertain future.

Henri J. M. Nouwen

Purpose Statement of Sabeel

Sabeel is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians. Inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, this liberation theology seeks to deepen the faith of Palestinian Christians, promote unity among them, and lead them to act for justice and love. *Sabeel* strives to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities. The word "Sabeel" is Arabic for "the way" and also a "channel" or "spring" of life-giving water.

Sabeel also works to promote a more accurate international awareness regarding the identity, presence, and witness of Palestinian Christians as well as their contemporary concerns. It encourages individuals and groups from around the world to work for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action.



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For more information on Friends of Sabeel groups in your area please contact our international representatives or the Sabeel Center in Jerusalem:

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