



## Is There Hope in the Violence of the Occupation?

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### Gaza

It hangs over me like a heavy fog that doesn't break. I can't get it out of my mind. Gaza is an unbelievably decimated area.

When I entered Gaza on November 5 through the Erez border, I clearly entered a war zone through the long "tunnel" of cement walls and mounted guns and turnstile checkpoints that had not been there a year before. It still didn't prepare me for what was to come. I was conscious of the recent 17-day relentless invasion by the Israeli military in the north of Gaza.

The main road to Gaza City from the border is no longer functional. I saw land devoid of trees ripped out by Israeli bulldozers, and demolished homes. It was an eerie feeling of desolation.

I was warmly greeted by Fr. M., the Catholic priest in Gaza City who welcomed me for a visit. He has built two private schools. The Latin Patriarchate lower grades school has 510 students. Thirty-five are Christian, the rest are Muslim. The Holy Family School for upper grades has 600 students. He is a prisoner in Gaza. If he leaves, he knows he will not be allowed to return. His mother died in the nearby hospital because they did not have the basic medicines she needed. He could not go to Bir Zeit to the burial of his mother or father.

It didn't take him long to begin pouring out the anger and pain of life in the Gaza Strip. Here are a few of the heartrending stories.

"A child of 13 in our school, whose father is a teacher there, was eating dinner one evening with his family. He heard a noise. He said to his father, 'I have something in my arm.' One tank shell broke his arm, another landed in his side, his chest. They took him to the hospital. They tried to repair the arm. The nerves of his hand and fingers were going numb. They couldn't remove the shell from his chest. It was too big. The parents took him to Egypt. The Israelis on the border of Rafah stopped them for three days. When he went through the security door, the security system rang. He could not go through security because of the metal in his chest. They told him to remove the metal from his body, and then he can go through security! He is now in America. My cousin took care of him. His hand is beginning to regain feeling."

"A man killed yesterday is the father of three children in our school, ages 11, 9 and 7."

The stories go on.

"The school was hit by three missiles. One entered the kindergarten class. The second hit the first floor. Glass and desks were shattered. This happened at 9:00 p.m. In the morning, when the children came to school, they insisted on seeing the rooms. When I spoke about it on TV, children remarked that I was very stressed. A child asked me a simple question. 'Do you know why Israelis bombarded our school? Because our school is the best in Gaza and they don't want us to continue our education.' Another child, age 7, asked me 'Abuna, why are you a liar?' I asked why this question. The answer, 'Always you tell us the Israelis will not bomb a school or church. What you told us is

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wrong. You lied.”

“A month ago, at 9:00 p.m. I received a phone call from the Governor of Rafah. ‘We need you tonight, Father. We need you.’ Over 90 small kids, age seven to 12, with 12 teachers, came from Rafah to Gaza (City) to spend a day at the seashore. At 2:00 p.m. they tried to return to Rafah. At Mizarim the road was blocked. From 2:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. they were enclosed in buses without permission to leave to go to the toilet. The Israelis blocked the only road for seven hours in the middle of Gaza, with 100 students. I called my friends and they brought the two buses here to Gaza City. I sent the children to our old school. It was 10:30 p.m. by then. The children were hungry and wanted to sleep. I sent a group of friends to a restaurant. They prepared two kabobs for each, and potable water. They couldn’t drink the salty water in the school. It was the first time they had ever seen a kabob. I bought mats and a covering for each one and they slept on the floor. By this time it was after 1:00 a.m. I paid \$1,300 for that night. In the morning, I provided something to eat and drink, and at noon a chicken-rice meal.”

In the 17-day invasion in October, 140 men, women and children were killed, over 500 were wounded, and 200 houses were destroyed or damaged in Beit Lahia, Beit Hanoun, and Jabaliya. Many more trees were uprooted. One of Fr. M.’s teachers took me around Beit Lahia and the outskirts of Beit Hanoun. I spoke with a mother standing beside her destroyed home. She and her family are homeless. I spoke with several others, all with stories of grief resulting from that recent invasion. When I saw the complete destruction of everything for several blocks in Beit Hanoun, it shook me deeply.

Fr. M. said “We are crying for peace, but they don’t accept peace. They are practicing terrorism on us, and call us terrorists. What are they asking us to do? Three thousand houses were destroyed in Gaza this year. Hundreds of thousands of trees were uprooted. Roads and infrastructure was destroyed. What is justice, then, for Palestinians? This closure, it is punishment of a nation. Why? Close the border for 23 hours. Why?”

Yet in all of this suffering, he is a man of peace and believes Israelis and Palestinians can live together. “Those who believe in peace will increase their treasure of peace. They become stronger. Hope

can increase the possibility for a good situation. Hope is a sign of life. Courage can help to save us.”

## **Tulkarem**

Our team of five from the Michigan Peace Team in October joined with seven other internationals in Tulkarem in the West Bank, through coordination by the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). Palestinian farmers are faced with Israeli settlers or Israeli soldiers who come by and drive them off their fields to prevent them from harvesting their own olives. Our hope was to intervene the best we could if settlers or soldiers came. Eight of us agreed to go to the olive harvesting of a family near Shufa, near the Israeli settlement of Evne Hefits. (The other four went to be with another family on the other side of the settlement). We joined in the olive picking. The days were very hot, even in late October. It was good to be working in solidarity with the family members.

One day, while we were picking olives, a farmer who is the nearby village mayor came and asked us to go with him. Communication was poor since none of us knew Arabic and the farmer didn’t speak much English. We were driven to another nearby farmer’s land and saw the problem. The fence defining the settlement boundary was below us. A new razor cyclone fencing was put up during the night, encroaching on the farmer’s land, taking about 10 olive trees. I felt a sense of violation, only a fraction of what these farmers had to feel. The settlement is illegal to begin with, taking Palestinians’ land, and here was an example of the continual encroachment. We reported this to the ISM coordinators and were told that they organize demonstrations demanding the return of land to the farmers.

One afternoon in Tulkarem we were debriefing from the day’s venture in the olive field. We heard shooting. A., our ISM coordinator, found out that the mosque two blocks from our house was under siege by Israeli soldiers. We went immediately to the site, and attempted to walk up to the two snipers (special forces), who had black masks on, at the mosque entrance. One made it clear with his M-16 rifle pointed right at us that we were not to come closer. There was no doubt he would shoot us. We stood in the street, communicating that as internationals we were watching. Some Palestinians

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were in the street. In the street behind us, some youths began throwing stones at military vehicles, and a sense of chaos developed. Both snipers began lobbing sound bombs in our direction and shot over the heads of the crowds. A. indicated that when youths throw stones, we cannot really do anything. We retreated from the street with the crowd, and saw a jeep at an intersection. Youths were throwing stones at it, and A. said he believed someone would be killed (by the Israeli soldiers).

The two soldiers stayed at the mosque, and not much more happened then. A. got a call from the press asking us to accompany them, saying that soldiers were searching a house across from the mosque. They wanted to get as close as they could. When we walked down the street with them, we held up our passports to indicate we were internationals. We were able to inch closer and closer, but were still nearly a block away. Eventually, the soldiers took two young men from the house with them, and the several jeeps and other military vehicles drove away.

We learned that the Israelis got a tip that a man they were after was visiting his sister in her home across from the mosque. They entered her home, made everyone get out of the house and stand face against the wall as soldiers searched the house. Other undercover soldiers, posing as Palestinians, had searched the mosque while the snipers kept guard. They did not find the man they were after, but took two sons of the sister, ages 20 and 16. This is a form of collective punishment. A soldier also took one of the woman's cell phones. A. said later in the day he believes no one was shot or killed because of our international presence.

## **Budrus**

ISM urged internationals to go on October 31 to the demonstration against the construction of the separation wall in Budrus, a town close to the Green Line (the 1967 border between Israel and the West Bank). We joined up with Palestinians from the town and about 30 other internationals, including Israeli activists. Our task was to accompany

Palestinians who would attempt to get in the way of the bulldozers doing the construction work, joining them in this direct action. We marched from the town to the construction site and were met by about six Israeli soldiers. The soldiers ordered us to get back. They started to beat a couple of Palestinians, and internationals successfully intervened. One Israeli activist who got near the construction machines was arrested. He yelled to us that he had been arrested 16 times, and that he was all right. As

Palestinians retreated, we internationals followed them. Two more Israeli activists were singled out and arrested.

Then soldiers ran to a garden with rifles raised, chasing kids who had started throwing stones at them. We internationals shouted to them "Don't shoot – they're just kids! Don't shoot the children!" As soldiers and crowds moved into the town streets, there was confusion as

to what was happening. We were told soldiers raided a shop. Kids were throwing stones and soldiers went after them. We internationals followed them shouting "Don't shoot the children!" Usually in retaliation for actions by Palestinians, Israeli soldiers will arrest someone as collective punishment.

Things calmed down after awhile. We had a few conversations with some soldiers, as they stood near their jeeps in the town. They told us they were doing this for the security of the settlement up the hill. We challenged the occupation of Palestinian territory and connected with them when we could on a human level. They brought up the Tel Aviv bombing that morning, that killed Israelis, and we said we abhorred violence on either side.

They detained a young Palestinian man who was walking by and demanded his papers. They made him stand against a wall. We gathered around, watching, making our presence felt. They asked him questions, and phoned in – presumably to their superior. They eventually let him go.

After that a few soldiers once more went after some kids in a garden who threw stones, and some of us followed saying "don't shoot the children!"

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As the afternoon wore on, one team of internationals said they would spend the night in Budrus, to keep an international presence. There were no injuries or deaths that day. The Tulkarem team returned home. This had been demonstration number 47 in Budrus against the separation wall.

### **End The Occupation**

The Israelis have killed many thousands of Palestinians and destroyed tens of thousands of olive, orange and other trees. Yet there are tens of

thousands of trees still standing and three million Palestinians still there. Israel can't kill them all or transfer them all off their land. Just surviving each day is resistance to the Occupation.

Since the United States gives over \$3 billion a year to Israel for the Occupation, we have a great responsibility to do everything in our power to end it. Even in the present darkness, Palestinians believe there will be peace between Palestinians and Israelis. Their living hope for the future of their children should motivate us to commit ourselves to the struggle.●

### ***COUNTER-INAUGURATION DEMONSTRATION!***

The West Michigan Justice & Peace Coalition is calling for concerned activists in all West Michigan communities to demonstrate for justice and peace on Thursday, January 20, at 12:00 p.m. in response to the inauguration of "President" George W. Bush. Activists in the Grand Rapids area are invited to gather at noon on the corner of Ottawa NW and Michigan NW, by the Federal Building. Feel free to bring a sign, and remember to wear a white arm band all day!

Call the IGE office in Grand Rapids at (616) 454-1642 with questions or comments.

Pass the word far and wide, and hope to see you on January 20!!

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