

Letters from Overseas

Susan Palmai Writes from Israel/Palestine

March 4, 2010

Staying true to the goal of accompaniment of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, I will tell you about two courageous, admirable women (among many) whom we have met in our travels throughout the West Bank and Israel. For those of you who have read my blog, this may be repetitious, but I am counting on not many people having done so.



In the village of Al Walaja, we visited a remarkable individual named Seham Salm, her father-in-law and two of her three sons. Seham told us her story. She and her immediate family had moved from country to country before eventually settling in Al Walaja, just west of Bethlehem, where her mother's family had lived for many years. In 2003, they built a family home but did not have the proper paperwork (i.e., title to the land), so the Israeli government not only ordered the house to be demolished but also ordered them to pay a fine of 70,000 NIS as well as the cost of the demolition. On January 31, 2006, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) arrived at the house with bulldozers, ordered the family out, and gave them just enough time to collect their identification documents and money before the bulldozers went to work. It is not uncommon for the people whose houses are being bulldozed by the IDF to have to bear the cost, according to Israeli Committee against House Demolitions (ICAHD) (www.icahd.org). Some of the family went to live with other relatives in Al Walaja and the two oldest sons lived in a tent. The community rallied and help them rebuild another house, albeit smaller than the first.

In November 2006, the bulldozers and the IDF arrived again unannounced and flattened house number two. This time the Holy Land Trust (www.holylandtrust.org) intervened and assisted with financing a third house, with help from international and even some Israeli organizations.

As we sat in the small but cozy house enjoying Seham's Palestinian hospitality, the view from the window was a pile of rubble from the demolitions and in the not-too-far distance, the ever-approaching settlement of Gilo. She said, "The first two houses were bigger," and it "hurts her heart to think about it." Her eldest son, Mu'taz, told us of being approached in checkpoints by soldiers wanting to befriend him, but with the hidden agenda (not too hidden) of trying to persuade him to become a collaborator with the army. Many generous offers and large promises are made to young Palestinian men to turn on their fellow Palestinians.

Now Seham and many other Al Walaja residents just wait for the next time. The demolition order is still in place.

In Sderot, the Israeli city where Qassam rockets launched from Gaza landed, we were addressed by Nomika Zion, who lived on the "urban" Kibbutz (a kibbutz in the city) of Migvan in Sderot and founded a grassroots organization called Other Voice (www.othervoice.org), which seeks to bring people from Sderot and Gaza together, promoting dialogue and creating relationships. She told us that from 2001 to 2008, with the exception of a five-month ceasefire, between five and 60 rockets per day were launched into Sderot. All the residents were traumatized, victims of shock and anxiety. She said that all households built bunkers where families slept, disrupting

private life completely. Schools had to reinforce their roofs, playground equipment, and bus shelters became bomb shelters. She also told us that from 2007 to 2009, the number of Qassam rockets landing in Sderot had diminished significantly.

Nomika told us that the focus of Other Voice has three parts:

- 1) Speak to ourselves about seeing each other as people, not Palestinians or Israelis
- 2) Try to influence public opinion in this way
- 3) Try to influence decision makers in the same way

She told us that in November 2008, 12 Palestinians were killed in Gaza by the IDF and that prompted Other Voice to write an article which was published in the mainstream Israeli daily, *Ha'aretz*, and translated and published around the world. She pleaded with her government—"not in my name" and "not for my security"—referring to the killings. She was ready to pay the price of social isolation but the response was overwhelmingly supportive. She said that she sent another letter to the Israeli leadership (former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defence Minister Ehud Barak) pleading with them to find non-violent solutions: four days later the bombing started. She said that since the bombing of Gaza in late December 2008 and January 2009, things have been quiet in Sderot with only occasional Qassams being fired. Nomika feels that there were many non-violent options open to the Israeli government to stop the Qassams—other than the massive bombing attack.

We hear these stories every day. They are not uncommon and we will be retelling many of them when the 34th group of Ecumenical Accompaniers returns to their home countries. We need to take the Kairos Palestine document¹ seriously and not allow it to be put on a shelf to collect dust.

We are looking forward to participating in a March 2010 conference at the Bethlehem Bible College, entitled "Christ at the Checkpoint." Hopefully, the theologians participating will come and join us as we do our early morning checkpoint duty. Otherwise, they will have missed an opportunity!

That's all for now from the Middle East.

Susan Palmai

To learn more, visit Susan's blog (<http://susansojourn.blogspot.com>) and view photos (<http://unitedchurch.smugmug.com/IsraelPalestine>) of EAPPI work taken by United Church accompaniers.

¹ The Kairos Palestine document (www.oikoumene.org/gr/resources/documents/other-ecumenical-bodies/kairos-palestine-document.html) is a heartfelt call from Palestinian Christians to their religious and political leaders, to Palestinian society and the Israeli society, the international community, and to Christian brothers and sisters in the Churches around the world. A word of faith, hope, and love, it is a call for "serious action in order to reach a just and definitive peace that will put an end to Israeli occupation of Palestinian and other Arab territories and will guarantee security and peace for all."

Susan Palmai works for The United Church of Canada as an Ecumenical Accompanier serving on the World Council of Churches/Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) (<http://eappi.oikoumene.org>). The views contained herein are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of her employer (The United Church of Canada) or the WCC. If you would like to publish the information contained here or disseminate it further, please first contact the EAPPI Communications and Advocacy Officer (eappi-co@jrol.com) for permission.

