



witnessing

resistance

voices from the new orleans human rights
delegation to occupied palestine

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human rights delegation
to occupied palestine**

Produced by NOLA Palestine Solidarity

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"I am a black South African, and if I were to change the names, a description of what is happening in the Gaza Strip and West Bank could describe events in South Africa."

- Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Introduction

In the summer of 2004, Eight New Orleans residents attempted to travel to the Israeli-occupied West Bank as part of a New Orleans Human Rights Delegation to Palestine. This book collects some of the photos and stories from their journeys.

The delegation visited Palestinian cities, towns, and villages and met with a broad array of community members – from political leaders to farmers, student activists, journalists, women’s groups, and many others. Delegates also met with representatives of the village of Beit Anan, near Jerusalem. More than two hundred former residents of Beit Anan live in the New Orleans metro area, and Beit Anan is one of more than fifty Palestinian villages that is in danger of losing its land and homes to Israel’s multi-billion dollar Apartheid Wall construction project.

The mission of the New Orleans Human Rights Delegation is to raise awareness in New Orleans about the situation in Palestine. Why is this necessary? After all, doesn’t the conflict receive extensive US media coverage?

The reason is this: our media is lying to us. The US media relates this as an age-old conflict, between two sides that can’t seem to get along, despite continuous US intervention in support of peace.

The truth, however, is much different. Our government is giving diplomatic, financial, and military support to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. In addition, our media distorts the truth, refuses to give coverage to Palestinian non-violent resistance, and ignores Palestinian suffering and death.

Since 1948, we have given - by conservative estimates - over 100 billion dollars in direct aid to the Israeli military. We give far more foreign aid each year to Israel than to the entire developing world combined-a total of \$10 million per day.

Is this a conflict between two equal sides? Are the Israelis just retaliating against Palestinian aggression?

Let’s go back to September 2000 and look at the beginning of this current Intifada.

The Al-Aqsa Intifada began as mass, nonviolent protests. Yet, during the first three months of the Intifada, the Israeli military fired 1.3 million bullets.

One hundred forty-seven Palestinians were killed before the first Israeli was killed on Israeli land. Eighty Palestinian children were killed before the first Israeli child was killed.

If Americans Knew, an organization based in California, did a study of newspaper coverage of the conflict. During the first six months of this Intifada, ninety-three Palestinian children were killed and four Israeli children were killed. *The San Francisco Chronicle* covered five of the ninety-three Palestinian children, and devoted six articles to the four Israeli children. One Israeli teenager received three separate articles.

A study of the *San Jose Mercury News* found that a full 70% of Israeli deaths received front page coverage, while less than 4% of Palestinian deaths during the same time period received coverage.

The pro-Israel side argues that they don’t target civilians, while Palestinians deliberately target civilians.

From September of 2000 through the end of the delegation’s trip to Palestine, 1,008 Israelis and 3,409 Palestinians were killed. Eighty-two percent of Palestinians killed were civilians. Six hundred twenty-one were children below the age of seventeen, and 411 of these children were shot with live ammunition. Of these Palestinian children, 200 were shot in the head, face or neck. At least 10,000 Palestinian children have been injured. There are also currently 100 Palestinian women and 377 children in Israeli prisons. Eighty percent of Palestinian children are routinely harassed or tortured and 31% suffer from disease.

More than one billion dollars worth of Palestinian infrastructure has been destroyed by Israeli forces in the last four years, including 298 Palestinian schools that Israeli forces have shelled or broken into. In just one city in Gaza, Rafah, the Israeli army is destroying six houses per day. So far 2,200

homes have been demolished in this area alone.

Two hundred Palestinian communities have no access to a clean water supply. In the Gaza Strip, an area with over a million Palestinians, there is no water supply that is fit for drinking. In the West Bank, where three million Palestinians live, there are currently 703 roadblocks and checkpoints.

Furthermore, the Israelis are building a massive series of walls, fences, and barriers throughout the West Bank. This Apartheid Wall is three times as long and twice as high as the Berlin Wall. Construction has already confiscated the best agricultural land and water aquifers from at least 30 Palestinian communities, with many more targeted.

In October of 2004, as delegation member Rebecca Rapp was preparing to return to the US, an Israeli commander fired twenty bullets, point-blank, into a 13-year-old Palestinian schoolgirl in Gaza. He has not been punished.

On September 17, 2002, Israeli settlers planted two nail bombs at a Palestinian elementary school, injuring six students. This was in Hebron, where many of the most extreme Israeli settlers live. On February 25, 1994, a settler in Hebron named Baruch Goldstein, from Brooklyn, entered a mosque while Palestinians were praying and opened fire with an automatic weapon, killing twenty-nine Palestinians and injuring many more. In the protests that followed, Israeli forces killed more than twenty-six people, and the entire Palestinian population was placed under curfew. No Israelis were punished, and the many members of settler community praised Goldstein's act.

Israel's advocates claim that armed Palestinian groups such as Hamas want to drive all Jews into the sea. However, it is Israeli leaders, including Ariel Sharon, who speak publicly of expelling Palestinians.

In addition, armed Israelis forcibly and illegally expelled the larger part of the Palestinian population from its land when the state of Israel was established in 1948. For the past fifty-seven years, Palestinian refugees have been denied their right of return to their ancestral villages and homes.

Prior to 1948, Jewish underground armed militant groups such as Haganah,

Irgun, and Stern had the mission to terrorize the Palestinians, destroy villages and slaughter entire Palestinian families. Thirty-four massacres were committed within a few months, at places such as Al-Abbasiyya, Beit Daras, Bir Al-Saba', Al-Kabri, Haifa, and Qisarya. These attacks aimed to drive out or kill the indigenous Palestinian population. Fifty percent of Palestinian villages were destroyed in 1948 and many cities were cleared of their population, including Aker, Bir Al-Saba', Bisan, Al-Lod, Al-Majdal, Nazareth, Haifa, Tiberias, Jaffa, and West-Jerusalem.

Israeli forces killed an estimated 13,000 Palestinians in 1948. They forcibly evicted 737,166 Palestinians from their homes and land. Five hundred thirty-one Palestinian villages were entirely depopulated and destroyed.

Palestinians are the largest single group of refugees in the world. One in three refugees worldwide is Palestinian, and it is estimated that there are about 6.5 million Palestinian refugees total. 3.8 million Palestinian refugees and their descendants displaced in 1948 are registered for humanitarian assistance with the United Nations.

On February 8, 2005, at the first Israeli-Palestinian summit in four years, Israeli Prime Minister Gen. Ariel Sharon and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas verbally agreed to end four years of fighting. In the first week after this agreement, four Palestinians – including one child – were killed by Israeli soldiers. Israeli troops continued military incursions, conducting military raids in both the West Bank and Gaza. Construction continued on the Apartheid Wall and expansion continued on settlements. In short, nothing changed for Palestinians, while the US media hailed the “new opportunity for peace.” It was this distortion and dishonesty that caused eight New Orleans residents to travel to Palestine.

Delegation members didn't just travel to occupied Palestine to document what was happening there; they went to take a stand for justice. By traveling to Palestine, US activists can make a concrete difference.

They can highlight that the conflict isn't Jew vs. Muslim, or Palestinian vs. Israeli, but a civilian population struggling against a brutal military occupation.

In addition, when Palestinians protest non-violently, it doesn't make the

news. When Palestinians are shot at, it doesn't make the news. But when Americans are there, our presence can help bring attention to the Palestinian struggle.

Finally, there is the rare, beautiful feeling of actually having positively affected someone's life.

Since last summer, the bold solidarity of a few New Orleans residents in Palestine has widened into a wide network of individuals and organizations in cities across the US and around the world. They have shown that there is something you can do to counter the lies and deceptions of corporate media and US politicians. They have shown the people of Palestine that they are not standing alone. They have built concrete links between movements here in New Orleans and international movements for justice.

The next step is yours. We have compiled this book to help spread the first-hand accounts of the New Orleans Human Rights delegation. We hope you will read these stories, share them with your friends and families, and join us in the struggle for peace with justice.

PRESS ADVISORY:

June 29, 2004

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

A diverse group of New Orleans residents will travel to the Holy Land to investigate human rights situation in Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

At least eight New Orleans residents; including an Episcopalian priest, a Jefferson Parish high school teacher, a French quarter waitress, a Tulane University Medical student, and a union organizer; plan on traveling to the Israeli-occupied West Bank this Summer as part of a New Orleans Human Rights Delegation to Palestine. While there, they plan to visit Palestinian cities, towns and villages, and meet with a broad array of community members – from political leaders to farmers, student activists, journalists, women's groups, and many others.

"While Louisiana schools and hospitals are dangerously under funded; hundreds of billions of US taxpayer dollars are going to support both the US occupation of Iraq and the Israeli occupation of Palestine. It seems vital to have first-hand information about what our money is paying for."

- Catherine Jones, Tulane medical student and member of New Orleans Human Rights Delegation.

This summer's delegation is not the first time that New Orleans residents have traveled to the Palestinian cities and towns. Last summer, three New Orleans residents took a similar trip. While there, they were inspired to take action. One of them, Jefferson Parish high school teacher Thomas Bacon, was wounded by Israeli soldiers while he was engaged in nonviolent protest against Israel's controversial "Apartheid Wall." "I couldn't stand back and do nothing while a massive crime was being committed in my name," he now says. Bacon is returning this summer to the same villages he visited last year.

During the summer, delegation members plan on staying in Palestinian villages and refugee camps to experience the reality of everyday life there. Among the organizations they plan to meet with are the International Women's Peace Service, the Christian Peacemaker Team, the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees, and Israeli peace groups.

Delegates will also meet with representatives of the village of Beit Anan, near Jerusalem. More than two hundred former residents of Beit Anan live in the New Orleans metro area. Recently, Beit Anan has been in the news as one of more than thirty Palestinian villages that are in danger of losing their land and homes to Israel's multi-billion dollar Wall construction project, known internationally as the Apartheid Wall.

Hasan Dayeh, a Gretna small business-owner with family in Beit Anan praises the work of the delegation. "Everybody talks about peace and justice, but these are people who are willing to do something about it," he says.

Members of The New Orleans Human Rights delegation will be in the Middle East from mid-June until late September. Two delegation members are currently in the West Bank, and two more leave next week.



A Palestinian farmer is denied access to his land

Update from Palestine Catherine

July 4, 2004

Today, while the people of my country celebrate independence from a colonizing power, Palestinian families are holding demonstrations at prisons all over the West Bank to demand the release of people who have been imprisoned for various acts of resistance to the military occupation of this land. In Jenin about 100 people, including Palestinian families and international and Israeli activists, arrived to demand the release of husbands, sons, fathers and brothers from this prison. Many of these prisoners have been held for months without formal charges. The demonstration took place outside the Salem military base, where there is also an illegal detention center. The march to the detention center and the subsequent demonstration were both peaceful, and there was no direct confrontation with the lines of border police, armed with M-16s, who had shown up to meet the demonstrators.

On the way to the demonstration, I talked to family members of the political prisoners, most of whom carried large framed photographs of their loved ones who were being held in the prison. It is a powerful, moving sight to see a group of Palestinian mothers carrying photographs of their sons in one hand and tearing pieces off of onions with the other hand to provide relief from the tear gas that may meet them once they arrive at the demonstration. I talked with Mohammed, a man who was leaning on a cane and holding a picture of his 14-year-old son who has been held in the detention center without charge for two and a half months. Despite his age, Mohammed's son is being held in the adult prison. "His voice is still the voice of a young boy," Mohammed told me. "I do not know why he is there. I don't know if we will ever see him again." At the demonstration, Mohammed was one of the many speakers who connected his son's imprisonment with the illegal occupation that controls the lives of Palestinians living in the West Bank.

"Soldiers come into our houses and take our sons away. We don't know why. We cannot farm our lands, we cannot travel to visit our families, some of us do not have food. With the wall [a concrete and razor-wire barrier the Israeli government is erecting to surround the West Bank, in violation of numerous international laws], it will only get worse. What is left for my son? He is fourteen years old. What is left for his future? If he gets out of this prison he will still be living in a prison."

Through a translator, I spoke with Alia, a Palestinian grandmother who was carrying, in addition to her three-year-old sleeping granddaughter, pictures of her two sons, both of whom have been in this prison on unfounded charges for over a year. She doesn't know if or when they will be released. She said, pointing to her granddaughter, "On the day the soldiers came to take away her father, they came into my kitchen and kicked over all the food we were making. They spit on my food! Why did they do that? They took him away with guns. Why? We don't know why. And his daughter here-she doesn't even know her father. He cannot work to buy food for us. Sometimes we have food, and sometimes we do not."

At the demonstration in Salem, as well as in every other place I have visited in the West Bank, I noticed that people may or may not talk about the violence that has been visited upon their families, but everyone talks about

food: whether they have it now and whether they will or won't have it in the future. Although in Jenin the most immediate reminder of the occupation is the ubiquitous presence of the Israeli soldiers, who enter the city most nights and begin shooting, the economic realities of closures, checkpoints and other physical barriers to a free society are ultimately proving more harmful to ordinary Palestinians. According to Khamel, a shopkeeper, "we do not have food the way we used to. The food can't arrive. We can't farm because maybe we cannot get to our farmland. We do not have any more money because they are cutting us away. Nothing can come here from Jerusalem, people can't buy things. My uncle used to be a hotel manager. Now he sells falafel down the street. He has a nice car-a beautiful car! But he can't drive it because he cannot afford to put benzene [gas] in it. And he can't sell it because no one can buy it."

In other parts of the West Bank, things are much worse. In Ramallah I met a group of international volunteers who have been working in Hebron for the past two years. According to one of them, "in Hebron the occupation has been mostly successful. So it's hard for us to figure out what to do now. When I say the occupation has been successful, what I mean is that in the old city of Hebron there is nothing left. You walk down the main street, where even a year ago there used to be a market; where a few years ago the whole city would congregate, and people would be selling everything-fruits, vegetables, falafel, clothes, furniture, cell phones-now you walk down the main street and there is absolutely nothing. Nothing. Not one person. The shops are this long white line of boarded-up doorways. The people who could leave have all left by now because there is absolutely nothing for them. The people who can't leave have moved up the hill and most are trying to grow things outside where they can. Soldiers don't even need to come in anymore to the old city because they've done their job. Everyone's gone." People describe the city like a ghost town in an old Western, where razor wire rolls through the dust like tumbleweed.

And yet in Hebron, as in the rest of the West Bank, the people who remain insist on living their lives as normally as they can. A successful demonstration in Hebron last week consisted of families going into the old city, despite their fears and despite the economic depression. Shopkeepers opening their doors and sold what they could even though layers of dust had piled up on the cans. In Jenin, mothers armed with photographs and onions face soldiers aiming M-16s, because resisting the occupation, in

whatever way, is the only way they may get their sons, fathers, husbands and brothers back. Next week the women of Jenin will return to Salem. According to Alia, "I will keep returning, as long as they are there; as long as I am here. They may take away my son, but they will not take away my heart."

On a more personal note, I'm fine; falling in love with the people here who offer us their food, their houses, their stories. As of yet I have had no reason to fear for my safety; on the contrary the people here constantly tell us they feel the need to protect us and I feel more looked after here than I ever have in my adult life. I am meeting incredible healthcare workers, including some of the most amazing paramedics I have ever encountered; 18-year-old boys who calmly treat trauma cases with the kind of skill I hope to one day possess. I miss all of you and appreciate all of your supportive emails. When I can I am trying to answer them one by one. For now please know that all of you are in my heart. More soon.

Love and solidarity,

Catherine

Statistics on hunger and nutrition in Palestine

-22% of Palestinian children were suffering from acute or chronic malnutrition in 2002 due to the Occupation.

-The UN's Refugee food program in Palestine has grown from 11,000 families before the second *Intifada*, to 220,000 in 2002, or half the Palestinian population.

-Nursing and pregnant mothers consume 15-20% less calories than they did before the *Intifada* began in 2000.

from <http://www.afsc.org/pwork/0302/030216.htm>