



IHMs in Action

“Witness to Occupation”

By Barb Beesley, IHM

I was not disappointed when my plan to accompany Palestinian children to school was changed. The children’s walk is met these days by rubber bullets and live fire from Israeli Defense Forces (IDS), and the Christian Peace Team members said more volunteers weren’t needed. Instead, the task which most needed attention in mid-April, 2003 was checkpoint watch. So Randy Bond, Joan Kusak, IHM, Twyla Meyer and I spent the better part of our week in Nablus at Azmut, the “checkpoint from hell.” People in ambulances have died at the checkpoint when denied entry to the city clinic. Others have been shot and killed there.



Joan Kusak, IHM (left) and Barb Beesley, IHM (right) talk with five detained men assuring them they’re working on their release.

We saw first hand the arbitrary delays and closures of the bridge leading from the city of Nablus to the five villages and the daily humiliations villagers endure as they attempt to travel to work, to school, to shops or to visit people. One unseasonably cold and rainy morning villagers were made to stand in the rain for several hours for no apparent reason.

Detentions were common. One could be pulled aside and made to sit or kneel for hours for “crimes” such as not remembering your long identification number (it was on the pass you handed to the soldier who then kept it a while), attempting to bypass the check point by crossing through the valley (a student was killed for this infraction four months ago; others have been shot in this act as well) or carrying a mallet. The solders say that once someone tried to pass with a gun. This didn’t happen while we were there.

Five men were kept kneeling on the stony ground with hands behind their backs and bowed heads. (See photo above.) Solders frequently went over to them and pushed their heads down further or shoved them. Two of the men were handcuffed.

Violence is less likely in the presence of internationals. Internationals working as we were with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) basically observed what was going on, noted illegalities, tried to relax situations by talking with soldiers and detainees and phoned Hamoked, a U.N. human rights organization, for assistance when direct negotiations failed as they most often did. Eventually a white jeep might appear and an army official would talk with the solders, and eventually detained men would be released and other situations dealt with. Sometimes, however, Hamoked was unable to assist. It was frustrating to see the checkpoint arbitrarily closed and villagers turned back to the city or to another checkpoint miles away.

Our worst experience happened on Sunday, April 27, 2003 when we encountered settlement soldiers. Two of them got out of a jeep at the checkpoint and began ranting and shouting. They charged up the bridge to where we were standing but gave their unwanted attention to two young women who had frozen in place the moment they heard the soldiers coming. The soldiers began loud brazen singing in a taunting manner, swinging hips and making obscene, suggestive gestures facing the two young women. The women were clearly horrified. Since I was closest to them, I crossed over to deflect the activity. The men

questioned me about what I was doing there and where I came from, denying I was from America, saying derisively that I was from “Deutschland” (Germany).

A jeep pulled up next to us and one of the women rushed to it, holding out her Koran, pleading for intervention. The soldiers inside ignored her. I stepped to the back of the jeep as the two soldiers walked across to the rest of our ISM contingent to harass them. I said to the two soldiers sitting in the back of the jeep (the door was open), “This is obscene.” Their response was, “The children throwing rocks at us is obscene.”

We later reported the incidents to Hamoked who notified the press as well as the military. I spoke about the obvious sexual harassment to a reporter from *Haaretz*, an Israeli newspaper. Shortly thereafter a military officer drove up and asked us what had happened and which soldiers had been involved. Since one of the soldiers was then on duty, I pointed him out. Will there be accountability for this activity?

The Huwwara checkpoint leading into Nablus is called the “Humiliation Place” by Palestinians because of the indignities locals suffer there: being stripped naked, being beaten, handcuffed or blindfolded. Some are held for hours, then – when it’s too dark to return to their homes – they’re released. This is dangerous because the army is known to shoot anything that moves in the dark.

In the month we were in Palestine, sixty-one Palestinians were killed in the Occupied Territories, including a woman tending livestock in a field, a child and an Associated Press reporter. Although we may not have heard about any of them, we have all heard about the Palestinian youth who bombed the Kfar Sava train station killing both himself and a security guard and wounding fourteen others, and a British suicide bomber who killed three people and wounded dozens more in a bar in Tel Aviv. The *Jewish Peace News* concludes, “The recent flurry of diplomatic hand-waving has had no effect on the violence and impunity with which the IDF continues its illegal operations, and the brutality and despair of the Palestinian response.”

The Israeli Defense Forces charge that many peace activists are “provocateurs” and “riot inciters” who deliberately interfere with IDF’s work. Officers who encounter foreign activists in closed military areas are ordered to arrest them, after which they will be deported.

In addition to sharing my experiences, I am trying to relate my learnings to the U.S. military occupation of Iraq and our Middle East policies. Amnesty International has reported that our soldiers have stripped Iraqi prisoners and marched them naked. This despite Article 17 of the Fourth Geneva Convention which states that “Protected persons are entitled in all circumstances to respect for their persons, their honor, their family rights, their religious connections and practices, and their manner and customs. They shall at all times be humanely treated, and shall be protected especially against all acts of violence or threats thereof and against insults and public curiosity.” (For a full copy of Amnesty International’s report “Iraq: Responsibilities of the Occupying Powers,” go to <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde140892003>.)

The need for accountability and objective human rights monitors is clear. Christian Peace Team members have monitored and reported to U.S. Army personnel on several occasions the sites where unexploded munitions are close to residential areas and not marked off with colored tape. Hundreds have been injured by these ordnances, and children have been seen walking in and around the area. While dangerous sites are left unguarded, the Army has Iraq’s Oil Ministry under heavy guard. The International Red Cross has reminded the United States of its obligations as an occupying power under the Geneva Conventions to remove unexploded ordnances. This cleanup could take 2-5 years.

We are reminded of the challenge given by the Most Reverend Wilton D. Gregory, President of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops:

“The United States must also accept the long-term responsibility to help Iraqis build a just and enduring peace in their country, while also addressing the many serious unresolved issues in the Middle East, especially the Israeli Palestinian conflict. War and reconstruction in Iraq must not result in an abandonment of our nation’s responsibilities to the poor at home and abroad, or a diversion of essential resources from other humanitarian emergencies around the world.”

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