



Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem (ELCJ)

**Urgent Press Release
Saturday, 9, March, 2002**

Israeli Tanks Occupy Lutheran School in Bethlehem.

This afternoon, Saturday 9, March, 2002, the Israeli army occupied Dar Al Kalima Model School and Wellness Center, located on a hilltop in southern Bethlehem. The tanks rolled into the premises around 2:00pm, destroying parts of the green area and soldiers broke down the Wellness Center iron door. No further information on inside damage is currently available, as no one is able to get close to the site, according to the Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church and founder of the Model School.

As far as we know no one has been injured or killed, due to the fact that there were no students in the school. Because of the ongoing heavy army operations we have been forced to close all our three schools in the Bethlehem area. We do not know when it will be possible to resume the education in our schools. We want to make clear that no shooting has taken place, neither today nor in the past, from any of our premises in Bethlehem.

The Dar al-Kalima School and Wellness Center, are part of the educational work of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Holy Land (ELCJ). It is part of the outreach ministries of our local congregation, Christmas Lutheran Church with the International Center of Bethlehem, and was recently built with the support of friends from several countries to help create hope and a better future for the children of Bethlehem. Currently there are 240 students enrolled in the school. The Wellness Center is due to open on 24 May 2002. One of its ministries is to bring healing to the many traumatized children and adults of Bethlehem area.

The occupation of our church property seem to be part of a pattern of military operations, where schools, hospitals, ambulances, medical personnel have been attacked. These actions are clearly breaching international law. Of the more than fifty Palestinians killed since yesterday, six deaths were reported from the Bethlehem area.

We denounce in the strongest possible terms the Israeli occupation of our Dar al Kalima School, and demand the immediate withdrawal of the army from our church property, as well as from the Bethlehem area and other Palestinian territories.

**Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan
The Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem**

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