

**E-mail Newsletter from
BISHOP DR. MUNIB A. YOUNAN
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem (ELCJ)**

**The ELCJ is serving in Palestine, Jordan and Israel.
June 18, 2002**

Salaam and grace to you from Jerusalem, Bishop Dr. Younan and the ELCJ churches.

We begin this newsletter by thanking so many of you who have written and called to say you are praying for us. Bishop Younan often speaks about the power of prayer, and the ELCJ is a praying church. Your prayers for the people of this land and for a just and enduring peace are very important to us. So many times we see the answers to your prayers in the way situations develop and are rightly handled, the way we have the right words to say in difficult times, the way our people continue to hope and to trust in God's love and the gift of a good future in this land despite the horrors of the moment. Thank you for your prayers and all your support.

The Visit of the Lutheran World Federation Delegation

The ELCJ and Jerusalem LWF were delighted to host the worldwide LWF delegation from June 6-11, 2002. Leading the delegation were Bishop Dr. Christian Krause, the LWF President, and Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko, the LWF General Secretary. Members of the LWF executive committee and the LWF staff joined with ELCJ Bishop Dr. Munib Younan, LWF Representative Mr. Craig Kippels and other members of the ELCJ staff for several days of intensive visitation and conversation with many people in many places.

The purposes of the LWF visit: 1) to become more fully informed about the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its results for people and projects, especially those related to the Augusta Victoria Hospital taxation issue, the LWF and ELCJ; 2) to discuss vital issues of concern about the Lutheran Church and LWF projects with Israeli and Palestinian political leaders; 3) and to be of support to the ELCJ bishop, pastors and congregations and the LWF projects, leaders and staff.

The delegation visited the Lutheran School of Hope in Ramallah that had been severely damaged by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) during the recent incursions, sieges and curfews. A visit was also paid to the Dar al-Kalima Lutheran School and the Lutheran Christmas Church compound in Bethlehem, both of which sustained great damage. The estimate of combined damages to Lutheran churches, schools and church property is one million US dollars.

Dr. Tawfig Nasser, CEO of Augusta Victoria Hospital, brought the delegation to key hospital treatment areas, noting especially the kidney dialysis unit, the intensive care unit, the pediatric unit and the medical unit treating patients with eye, ear, nose and throat conditions. Dr. Nasser also showed the delegation the cancer treatment equipment that has already been installed and spoke about the future plans of AVH for the only cancer treatment center available to Palestinians in the West Bank.

While in Ramallah, the delegation visited with Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Yasser Arafat at the PA headquarters. The compound has now been nearly destroyed due to another attack by IDF soldiers, F-16 bombers and tanks on June 6, only about twenty-four hours before the LWF delegation arrived. The dust was still rising from destroyed buildings and vehicles. LWF President Krause noted the significance of being able to visit Mr. Arafat at this crucial time, and expressed sympathy for the grave situation Palestinian people are experiencing. "Nevertheless we must continue to keep hope burning in our hearts for a just peace in this land for all people."

Mr. Arafat told the group, "We are in the middle of a real tragedy. More than 67,000 Palestinian people have been killed or wounded in this conflict." He went on to describe how the Palestinian economy is devastated, leaving a very high employment rate. Half of the Palestinian farmland has been destroyed by the Israeli soldiers and 60 per cent of the olive trees have been uprooted. Olive trees account for the entire living of many Palestinian people. Mr. Arafat expressed his gratitude for the presence and support of the Palestinian Christian community, noting that when he was prohibited from going to Bethlehem to celebrate Christmas with his people in 2001, the thirteen heads of Christian churches in Jerusalem "brought Christmas to me." ELCJ Bishop Younan stated that Palestinian Christians are part and parcel of the Palestinian people, and what happens to Palestinians also happens to the Christians."

A small delegation led by the LWF President Christian Krause also met with Israeli Minister for Foreign Affairs Shimon Peres on Monday, June 10, to discuss the question of employment taxes being levied on Augusta Victoria Hospital. President Krause expressed his gratitude to Minister Peres for meeting with the group and brought the hopes of the LWF and Lutheran churches around the world for an enduring peace in the land.

When the LWF General Secretary Ishmael Noko was asked about the outcome of the meeting with Mr. Peres, Noko said: "The discussions were cordial, open and frank. In the context of these discussions the LWF requested through Mr. Peres the State of Israel to uphold the present agreement between the LWF and the State of Israel; this agreement grants the LWF blanket tax exemption among which is the employer's tax and secondly that the two parties should agree on the suspension of the pending court case. The LWF also raised the issue of the recent destruction of Lutheran church property by the Israeli military forces, amounting to one million US dollars. Minister Peres promised to convey all these concerns to the relevant government ministers and ministries."

Sunday, June 9, was spent with the congregation of the Lutheran Church of the Reformation in Beit Jala, and with the boys from the Lutheran Home for Boys on the church compound. LWF President Krause preached and Bishop Younan translated the message based on Isaiah 61:1-4, focusing particularly on the phrase "to comfort all who mourn." The noon luncheon was in honor of the boys in the Boys' Home who were finishing the school year, four of whom were graduating from high school.

A formal reception honoring President Krause, General Secretary Noko and the other members of the LWF delegation was held in the Festival Hall of Augusta Victoria Hospital. Representatives of the Christian churches in Jerusalem and the Muslim chief judge of Palestine

who traveled from Hebron were special guests, along with diplomats, clergy and other friends of the ELCJ and Augusta Victoria Hospital. Bishop Younan expressed his gratitude to the LWF delegation for their visit and to the many people who came to the reception to greet them.

2. ELCJ Schools Plan 2002 Graduations

After losing many school days due to Israeli incursions and curfews, the Lutheran schools have extended their class sessions to June 22 in order to complete their work. Also, the schools are good places for the children to be, many of whom are traumatized by their experiences in the midst of Israeli shelling, bombing, home invasions, curfews and the loss of health and life in their communities. Keeping the schools open for a few weeks helps to compensate for the losses and trauma.

Despite these losses, the Lutheran schools are graduating senior classes in June and July. The Talitha Kumi Lutheran School in Beit Jala graduated fifty-four students on June 5. Bishop Younan spoke at the graduation and emphasized this fact: "You are free to go and study anywhere you choose, but you must come back to Palestine." These comments are crucial for Palestinian young people because many are leaving the country and not returning due to the oppression of the Israeli military occupation and the lack of work and a future. Principal Wilhelm Gollar also spoke about the importance of staying in the land, saying, "Palestine deserves to have freedom for its people."

Evangelist Hani Odah, Headmaster, reports that the Lutheran School of Beit Sahour will graduate twenty-two students on July 6, all the graduates having completed the scientific stream of study.

The Lutheran School of Hope in Ramallah was scheduled to have its graduation on June 12 but once again Ramallah was under curfew by the IDF. The ceremony has been postponed until July 5 when forty-two students will graduate, some in the scientific stream, the others in the art stream, Headmaster Michael Abu-Ghezallah reports.

Our congratulations and best wishes go out to all the graduating students, including four young men who live at the Lutheran Home for Boys in Beit Jala.

3. Life for Three Million Palestinians Has Become Even More Difficult

Today, June 18, yet another bus was bombed in Jerusalem. We condemn such senseless violence, as we consistently have condemned all acts of violence on either side of this conflict. We pay our respect and offer our condolences to all victims of violence and their families on both sides. We feel more and more powerless as the spiral of violence continues. It seems that violence is taking over our society. More and more we believe the role of the Christian churches must be to break the cycle of violence, working for the implementation of the UN resolutions for a two state solution, with people living side by side in peace. This must happen for the sake of all Israeli and Palestinian children.

We are also learning of the fences Israel is constructing to separate Israelis and Palestinians. These barriers remind us of the Berlin Wall and the South African policy of separation. But no fence and no amount of military arms will ever create a true security. The only real security is achieved through making justice with one's neighbors. A fence only addresses security problems. The real problems here are political in nature which can only be solved by political agreements.

Bishop Younan points out that the military incursions into Palestinian cities and towns are becoming routine and commonplace. The world community is now looking the other way, not noticing that the Palestinian future cannot be built because its infrastructure is knocked down by the Israeli army time and again by means of these repeated incursions accompanied by much destruction. The infrastructure is rebuilt, knocked down again and rebuilt over and over.

Protests must continue to be made about the Israeli incursions and curfews that are now occurring quickly and easily. The world must look again at the Palestinian people and the great need for an end to the Israeli occupation and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. We ask you to make your opinions known to your national elected officials, expressing strongly and repeatedly your concern and your interest in seeing the Palestinian people freed from oppression and living in their own state, under their own elected leadership.

Not only are the Israeli military incursions continuing, but more and more steps are being taken by the military to isolate and imprison Palestinian people in small areas.

We are receiving reports from people living in the Bethlehem area and the Ramallah area that the towns themselves are being fenced off by the Israeli soldiers. Deep trenches are dug and three levels of coiled razor wire are being strung around the towns in an effort to prohibit any Palestinian travel unauthorized by the Israeli military. The entrances/ checkpoints are closely guarded by the IDF and only people with proper permits are allowed to enter or leave.

Not only do Palestinians need permits to enter Jerusalem, they now must have permits to travel between Palestinian towns. For instance, it is not possible for people from Ramallah to travel to Jericho or to Nablus without a permit. As Bishop Younan travels in the West Bank, he reports seeing men, women and children climbing mountains to move between Palestinian towns, trying to avoid Israeli checkpoints where they are turned back. Truck shipments of food and supplies must be made "back-to-back", that is, unloading the supplies from a truck on the Israeli side and reloading them into a truck on the Palestinian side (or Palestinian into Israeli), all activity being supervised carefully by fully armed Israeli soldiers. It has been estimated that if a supplier in Hebron in the south wished to ship products to Jenin in the north (both West Bank cities), it would be necessary to load and unload trucks upwards of twelve to fourteen times or more, assuming, of course, that such loading and unloading is even permitted by the Israeli military at a back-to-back area.

Following is a quotation on June 1 from the Palestine Monitor, an information clearing house for Palestinian non-governmental organizations:

“The implementation of the separation, or outright apartheid policy that the Israeli government has decided to impose in the Occupied Palestinian Territories has begun. So far, little protest has been launched against this merciless plan that is in contravention of the Fourth Geneva Convention and violates international human rights laws.

“The ‘silent’ war on the Palestinian people in the occupied territories is extremely dangerous, more so than any bloody military aggression. The closure has caused several deaths already and many more innocent people will die still if prevented from crossing checkpoints and roadblocks to receive medical treatment. Furthermore, tens of thousands of people living in remote villages all over the West Bank will starve because food and essential supplies cannot reach them.

“The Palestinian areas have been turned into isolated camps of slow death. The world cannot remain silent while millions are being subjected to this horror.”

LWF General Secretary Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko commented during his recent trip to Jerusalem, “The humiliation the Palestinians are experiencing can be described only in tears, not in words.” Dr. Noko told Palestinian Chairman Arafat that he has lived in South Africa and experienced firsthand the apartheid system that existed there. “But I have never seen anything like this,” Dr. Noko said, referring to the dangerous and humiliating experiences of the Palestinian people living under the Israeli military occupation.

Bishop Younan states that the situation for Palestinians is now tougher than during the violent incursions and curfews in March, April and May 2002. That is because the world has looked away and “to the outside world when there doesn’t appear to be any killings – things seem to be calm. But under the surface,” the bishop said, “everything is boiling.” Bishop Younan requests your continued prayers and active help for the ELCJ and the three million Palestinian men, women and children now imprisoned in their villages and towns. Thank you for everything you are already doing.

*Noted by Rev. Dr. Mary E. Jensen
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