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The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem

NEWSLETTER
from
Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan
Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem of the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem,
working in Palestine, Jordan and Israel
April 17, 2002

Dear Friends,

Grace and salaam in the name of our Savior Jesus, whose resurrection gives us the hope of new and abundant life even in the midst of heartbreaking crises.

Invasion of the Lutheran School of Hope in Ramallah:

At 11:45 am, Tuesday, April 16, 2002, Israel Defense Force (IDF) soldiers blasted their way into the Lutheran School of Hope in Ramallah. All of Ramallah was under curfew at that time but neighbors beside the school immediately notified Rev. Ramez Ansara of the invasion and kept him apprised of the sights and sounds as the invasion continued for over four hours. Many tanks arrived on the scene, according to neighbors, and there were sounds of shooting, explosions and pounding with sledgehammers coming from inside the school. The soldiers left at about 4:30 pm, with the pastor and church members unable to check the damage until the curfew is lifted for a few hours, perhaps in the next few days. Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan placed countless phone calls to the Israeli government and military protesting the invasion, and also called foreign diplomats and partner churches, asking for intervention. Because the property cannot yet be inspected we cannot report the damage at this time. No one was in the school – no students, staff or guard – at the time of the invasion. Bishop Younan and Rev. Ansara emphasize there has never at any time been Palestinian gunmen in the school. Bishop Younan noted that the ELCJ school system has been built with sweat and blood over the past thirty-five years, and now we see much of it destroyed in just a few hours.

Ramallah, Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour:

These four Palestinian towns close to the edges of Israeli-defined “Greater Jerusalem” continue to be military occupied by the IDF. Other towns have also been occupied and great damage and pain has been inflicted, especially in the refugee camps. Mr. Sharon has announced that the IDF will soon pull out of Nablus and Jenin, but that Ramallah and the Bethlehem area will continue under the re-occupation for the time being.

It is precisely in these Palestinian towns near Jerusalem that four of the six ELCJ congregations are located and do their ministry. But as the Apostle Paul described the church as the Body of Christ, that which happens to a foot or arm or major organ of the body also happens to the rest of the body. And so the congregations in the Old City of Jerusalem and in Amman, Jordan, as well as Bishop Younan and his staff are also strongly affected by the Israeli invasion and the resulting suffering, damage, pain and death.

On Sunday, April 14, from 1:00 - 4:30 pm the IDF broke into and used the church parsonage in Ramallah. Although the house is clearly marked as church property and Rev. Ramez Ansara had clearly posted his telephone number in case the soldiers wanted to enter, they simply smashed the front doors with explosives and made themselves at home. The parsonage is not occupied at the moment; Rev. Ansara is living nearby with his family while the parsonage is remodeled. The house is used as a storage area and occasional meetings are held there. The soldiers cut off the electrical supply to the house, ate food, made coffee and used the bathrooms, taking showers and using the toilets. By the time Rev. Ansara could inspect the property during a lift in the curfew on Monday, the bathrooms were filled with flies and the odor was very strong. The soldiers had eaten food, leaving some apples behind. They poured liquid coffee on the floors. They tore down the books from the pastor’s study bookshelves and entered all cupboards and closets, using what they wanted. Rev. Ansara stated that three boxes of communion wine (totaling 18 bottles) were stolen by the soldiers.

We continue to be very concerned about the Christmas Lutheran Church and compound in Bethlehem. Rev. Mitri Raheb reports that sporadic attempts by small groups of soldiers to enter the church property are continuing. Mr. Charlie Haddad, principal of the Dar al-Kalima Lutheran School in Bethlehem reports that the IDF once again entered the school in this second incursion, damaging the beautiful, specially-designed metal front door. It is now riddled with bullet holes. Because the door was not fully opened, the soldiers entered the school through windows and then shot out the glass and aluminum window in front of the computer laboratory. Fortunately the computers were not damaged, due to their position within the lab. Mr. Haddad reports that less damage was done to the school this time. He was able to check twice during times the curfew was lifted. The inspection on Monday, April 15, showed no new activity.

Life under 24 hour curfew in the Palestinian towns and cities:

When the military 24 hour curfew is in effect, people are not allowed to leave their homes. Anyone out on the streets is likely to be shot. Snipers are located at strategic points everywhere. Occasionally the curfew is lifted for a few hours so that people can go outdoors and do shopping and visit with neighbors. But these hours slip by quickly,

especially when many stops must be made to get a minimum of food and medicine. The grocery store shelves were bare in Bethlehem, for instance, until truckloads of food arrived. People noticed immediately that all the food was Israeli made. Other humanitarian groups are trying their best to enter the Bethlehem areas with food and medicine, using back roads, and some of them are successful.

Life without work, church, school, interaction with neighbors, having to do without enough food and water and, in some cases, no electricity or telephone, is very depressing and discouraging. It drains the life out of people and families who must stay together behind doors and covered windows. In some cases people live alone and are isolated. Parents try to protect their children but it's very difficult when tanks and soldiers are right outside the door, shooting and bombing. Mr. Charlie Haddad described how he and his wife Rania handle the situation with their little daughters, ages 3 and 5. When the bombing and shooting first began they told the small children it was a game, it was firecrackers, etc. But as the days went on and the family could not go outdoors, they tried to explain to the girls in simple terms what was happening, that Palestinian people and Israeli people all wanted the same land, like right there in Bethlehem, for example, and sometimes people would fight about that. The girls could see pictures of the fighting on TV and had questions which their parents tried to answer simply and honestly. Charlie told how the children ducked down in the back seat of the car when the family was able to go out for food when the curfew was lifted. Why did they duck? Because an Israeli tank passed their car and was shooting in the air, even during the lifted curfew. The three-year-old girl began crying at the sound. Children everywhere are being traumatized by the re-occupation and its many effects.

Rev. Mitri Raheb has had another kind of experience which everyone dreads while under curfew. He has become ill with what seems to be pneumonia, requiring antibiotics and medical treatment. The bishop and the Red Cross were able to help Rev. Raheb, getting him to the Bethlehem hospital even under curfew, and medications were brought to him by a church friend from Jerusalem. Illness and injury go hand in hand with extended curfews, as do emotional fears and breakdowns. We continue to pray for all the people living under these curfews, helping whenever it is possible.

The Local Heads of Christian Churches in Jerusalem Confer with Secretary of State Colin Powell, Saturday, April 13, 200

In a meeting which Bishop Younan described as "excellent," patriarchs, archbishops and bishops met with Mr. Colin Powell at the residence of the American Consul General in Jerusalem to talk about the Palestinian/Israeli conflict from their perspective.

After formal greetings and a formal photograph, the meeting with the local heads of churches was held with Mr. Powell and his aides and with General Zinni and the American Consul General and their aides present. Patriarch Michel Sabbah of the Roman Catholic Church arranged the agenda and the various leaders of churches spoke about their particular concerns. An Armenian bishop stated that Israel makes promises but does not keep them, and told how a 22 year old Armenian Christian sacristan was shot in the Church of the Nativity even as medication was being brought to him by the

Red Cross. The Syrian Orthodox bishop stated that after Mr. Powell meets Mr. Arafat, "We are ready to go to the Nativity Church in Bethlehem to hold a mass together." All the bishops had the hope that the issue of the Church of the Nativity must be resolved through the American Secretary of State.

Bishop Younan stated that it was important to deal with the root cause of the conflict, not only the symptoms. He defined the root cause to be the Israeli military occupation. This occupation must be ended, Bishop Younan said, with a shared Jerusalem, dismantled settlements and rights for refugees. The bishop told Mr. Powell, "I am myself a refugee. I don't know what would have happened to me if I had grown up in a refugee camp. Would I have become a priest or a bishop? I do not know. I thank God that the church embraced our family." Bishop Younan then spoke of the fact that churches, pastors, priests, church members and church property have not been spared in the IDF incursions. Mr. Powell thanked Bishop Younan for his "passionate words."

The bishop insisted the Palestinian people expect the United States to be an honest broker in helping to resolve this conflict. The U.S. has been given power by God, and it is God's call that weaker, oppressed countries like ours must be given the same freedom the powerful now enjoy. The UN resolutions must be respected and hope must be given to the Palestinians. There must be an arrangement of political process leading to security for all parties. Mr. Powell was reminded of his own roots in the US Presidents Washington and Lincoln, and also Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Mr. Powell thanked the heads of churches and stated, "You give optimism to my mission."

A Word from Bishop Younan

"There are times when I feel as if the Lutheran churches are being targeted by the IDF in a systematic way. We have now had six church buildings entered and damaged, even used as shooting posts. We need a full withdrawal of all Israeli forces from the Palestinian cities and we need international protection as Palestinian people and institutions. Our three greatest needs in the ELCJ at this moment are as follows:

- 1) Humanitarian aid,
- 2) Repairs of the damages done by the IDF to our buildings,
- 3) Help for the local operating budget of the ELCJ, its churches and schools which is having extensive problems due to the crises

Whatever help individuals, congregations, countries or other groups may be able to give will be gratefully and joyously received, and will help the continuation of the Christian witness in our land. Please continue to pray for us."

*Noted by Rev. Dr. Mary E. Jensen,
Communications Assistant to the ELCJ and Bishop Younan*