



نِدْرَالَا يِفْ قَسْمِ يَرْشُولَلَا قَسْمِ يَرْجِنَالَا قَسْمِ يَرْكَلَا
The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan

NEWSLETTER
from
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Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan,
working in Palestine, Jordan and Israel
April 10, 2002

Dear Friends,

Grace and salaam in the name of our Savior Jesus, whose resurrection we are continuing to remember and celebrate. However, we are speaking to you from a Jerusalem which is brokenheartedly watching violence, suffering and death spiral out of control in Palestine and Israel.

In this newsletter you will find current information about the four ELCJ congregations located in the Israeli re-occupied territory; about a situation at Augusta Victoria Hospital; and about a peace initiative proposed by the Heads of the Christian Churches in Jerusalem.

Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour:

Bethlehem, the town of Christ's birth, is experiencing extreme violence and terror since the Israeli tanks and troops moved in early Tuesday morning, April 2. All residents are under 24 hour curfew and must stay in their homes. Churches and other religious houses are being invaded and damaged, along with private residences. People have been injured with medical help at a minimum, and there are dead, decomposing bodies that have not been removed by ambulances. People who have been kept in their houses for many days are running short of water, milk and medicine. Often there is no electricity, water or telephone. When the curfew is lifted for a couple of hours to allow for grocery shopping, the people often find the stores empty, with no fresh food at all. The Church of the Nativity is under siege by the Israeli military, with people inside. These people are not hostages.

The Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church and the other buildings in its compound in the heart of Old Bethlehem have been extensively damaged in the recent Israeli incursion. The report from Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb on Tuesday, April 2, was of damage to the parsonage entryway and garage doors by the tanks. On Thursday, April 4, the

Christmas church compound was invaded by three groups of soldiers and Rev. Raheb was detained by the soldiers as they searched the premises for two and one-half hours. Since then there has been sporadic attempts by six of the same soldiers to come in the church compound again. On one occasion Rev. Raheb found them in the compound where they broke down two doors to storage closets, even though he offered to use the keys. He has repeatedly offered keys to open various rooms but the doors are usually broken down.

A main entry door and a glass façade in front of the computer laboratory at Dar al-Kalima Lutheran School has also been damaged in this second invasion. The repair work in the school from the last incursion was just being completed.

The churches and schools in Beit Jala and Beit Sahour are safe at this writing, but Rev. Jadalleh Shehadeh of Beit Jala stated that people are kept in their homes as in jails, unable to go out for fear of being shot. Evangelist Hani Odeh of the Beit Sahour church describes the same situation in Beit Sahour.

In all of these towns, including Ramallah, the schools and institutions are closed. The work of the churches cannot take place, not even worship services. Where telephones are working it is possible for the pastor to call parishioners, but this is the limit of congregational work.

Ramallah:

The city of Ramallah was invaded on Friday, March 29, and the people have lived under a 24 hour curfew ever since. Occasionally the curfew is lifted to allow shopping for food and medicine, but the food supply is low in the town. One truckload of vegetables was allowed in recently.

Rev. Ramez Ansara was brought to the Lutheran Church of Hope by about ten soldiers on Sunday, April 7. They wanted to search the church building and as they went from room to room, they used the pastor as a human shield, pushing him in the room first and then jumping in behind him with weapons raised. When it was time to search the sanctuary, the pastor insisted weapons could not be brought in, and two soldiers left their weapons with the other soldiers and went with the pastor into the church itself. They searched everywhere, including the altar, organ, piano and pews. A two hour search revealed no gunmen or weapons, of course, and the pastor was then sent back to his house. This was probably the most nervewracking part of the experience, Rev. Ansara said, because snipers are located on the roofs of house, shooting people who are out in the streets. He did arrive home safely.

A member of the Lutheran congregation in Ramallah, Hani Jildeh, 45 years, was shot in the leg and is recovering. Another member, Suheila Mreibi, described how her family is sharing food with the family next door in their building, and how difficult it is to go shopping in the few hours allotted. "The stores do not have much food and because the spaces are small, we must go in one-by-one. It takes much time, and then we must hurry home to be safe." Suheila also stated they are eating as little as possible to conserve

food. The water supply is also a problem. For many days Suheila's family and neighbors did not have city water and were sparingly using water from the small tanks on their roof. There are reports in some of the re-occupied towns of people drinking water that is contaminated. There are also many problems with sewage and garbage.

Bethlehem Checkpoint:

Just north of Bethlehem and right beside the Tantur Ecumenical Center is the primary Israeli military checkpoint into and out of Bethlehem. At 10 am Wednesday, April 3, the heads of Christian churches in Jerusalem and many Palestinian and expatriate Christian pastors and church workers gathered in the rain and wind to ask for admission to Bethlehem. In front of them and to the side were Israeli tanks, bulldozers and many soldiers. The group sang hymns and prayed, waving olive branches and signs calling for peace even as they struggled to hold their umbrellas. Bishop Munib Younan of the Lutheran community, Bishop Riah abu-al Asal of the Anglican community and many others spoke directly to the Israeli army commander for Bethlehem, asking permission to pass the checkpoint and help the churches and people in Bethlehem. Although there was a lengthy debate, the permission was denied. "We have our orders and you may not pass because we are at war," the commander said several times. The bishops replied, "We also have our orders from our Lord Jesus to be helping people in need."

The Heads of Churches returned to the Bethlehem checkpoint on Monday, April 8, again to ask for entry. They read the Gospel story of Jesus' birth and heard again the angel's words "Be not afraid, for I have news of great joy." At one point an army jeep drove in quickly and a soldier raised his rifle toward the group of church leaders. The commander at the checkpoint shouted at him to stop, not to shoot, and he stood down.

Augusta Victoria Hospital:

As the protest group at the Bethlehem checkpoint was dispersing on April 3, a telephone call to Bishop Younan alerted us to yet another crisis, this time at Augusta Victoria Hospital on the Mount of Olives. Israeli border police were at the hospital, demanding to have two employees brought to them for questioning and possibly to be brought to police headquarters. Soon a negotiating session was arranged in the offices of the Lutheran World Federation, across the street from the hospital. Present were the hospital administrators, UN leaders, various international representatives and Bishop Younan, who is the chair of the LWF board in Jerusalem. It was carefully presented to the border police that international law prohibits the entrance into churches and hospitals, and that Augusta Victoria is an international hospital that gives humanitarian aid to every needy person regardless of sex, religion or nationality. "The hospital must remain a place of healing and comfort," Bishop Younan said, "and it needs to continue to serve without any intervention from any side." Bishop Younan and the hospital administration assured the border police that every effort is made to have valid permits for the hospital employees who live in the West Bank to enter Jerusalem. After the discussion the border police went to speak with their commander and then drove away.

Peace Initiative from the Heads of Christian Communities in Jerusalem

On Sunday, March 31, 2002, the heads of Christian churches in Jerusalem, including Bishop Dr. Munib Younan, tried to enter Ramallah to have a solidarity visit with Chairman Arafat and to carry a new peace initiative. This initiative was developed by the patriarchs and heads of churches in Jerusalem. The heads of churches contacted Rabbi Michael Melchoir, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Israel, to tell him they were going to see Mr. Arafat and would be carrying a message of peace. The local Christian church wants to be a mediator in the situation. The initiative they have developed is based on international legitimacy.

“Simple as we are, we believe church leaders can play a role in the search for peace,” Bishop Younan has stated. It is understood that the Archbishop of Canterbury has also contacted Rabbi Melchoir. Unfortunately the heads of churches have not been able to enter Ramallah nor have they even gotten a response from Rabbi Melchoir. They have also asked several times to see Prime Minister Sharon but have been told that he is busy with Pesach (Passover). They told the representative of the foreign ministry that the real Pesach will be celebrated when the warfare and bloodshed are stopped.

The initiative itself states that the Christian church leaders will work to convince both sides to implement a total hermetic ceasefire. They want to meet with Mr. Arafat and insist on a total ceasefire and then take this promise from him and go to P.M. Sharon and present their initiative, also insisting on a total ceasefire. They will ask for a total withdrawal from Palestinian areas, an end to the siege and implementation of international legitimacy, referring to United Nations Resolution 1402 which calls for withdrawal and 1397 calling for a two state solution.

This initiative may not seem to bring new ideas, but at least it allows local Christian leaders in this country to assume their role to prevent more death, destruction and hatred in Palestine and Israel. Their aim is to be makers of peace. For this reason, they ask to be given this opportunity so they can really work at being peacemakers.

The church leaders were able to meet with the American General Zinni on Friday, April 5, and found him open to the initiative presented. He said he will make contact and that he appreciated their work and their presence.

Continuing to Pray and Work

We are continuing to try every avenue to bring peace to this land. We are continuously praying for an end to the violence, an end to the illegal occupation, an end to the suffering. The situations in the re-occupied Palestinian cities and towns are very severe, and right now we are particularly concerned about the city of Jenin.

We continue to ask for your help and your prayers. Please contact your governments and ask that pressure be brought on Israel to immediately withdraw the tanks and troops from the re-occupied Palestinian cities and towns, and to end the illegal occupation.

We are looking ahead to the work of the ELCJ and its congregations when the Israeli military finally withdraws. There is going to be enormous expense to help people get back to a normal life, to repair houses and churches and schools, and to have money to continue ministry, including pastors' salaries and the costs of congregational programs.

Thank you for all you do and for all your prayers and encouragement.

Your brother in Christ,

+ Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan
Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem

Notes from Rev. Dr. Mary E. Jensen
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