



Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCJ)

**E-Mail Newsletter from
BISHOP DR. MUNIB A. YOUNAN
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCJ).
The ELCJ is serving in
Palestine, Jordan and Israel.
March 17, 2003**

Salaam and grace to you from Jerusalem, the city of Christ's death and resurrection.

The world's eyes are focused on the looming possibility of war in Iraq and on the intense discussions in the United Nations regarding this war. We in Palestine and Israel follow each detail carefully, knowing that the conflicts in both Iraq and the UN will have specific consequences for us – indeed, for the entire world. We believe these to be negative consequences and continue to raise our urgent voices to warn world leaders that war in the Middle East will only serve to increase bitterness, hatred, acts of war and religious and political extremism, rather than deter them. Speculative promises of “positive breakthroughs in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict following the war” are minimal at best. We do not believe these promises, knowing that the basic issues of the conflict will not have changed and may have become increasingly worse during a war.

Specifically, in regard to Palestinian people living under Israeli military occupation during the possible war in Iraq, we are concerned about rigid closures and strict curfews and about the possible “transfer” (expulsion) of Palestinian people from camps, villages and prisons. We ask you to keep your attention on this situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the weeks and months to come, remembering us in prayer and in your communications with others. May God bless us all, no matter where we live.

1. The Rapidly Deteriorating Situation for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza

Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza are no longer simply facing a humanitarian crisis – they are now in the midst of it. This economic, food, health care, education and social service crisis has been produced by the relentless Israeli closures of towns and villages, often keeping the entire population under 24 hour curfews. People are unable to get to work, to school or to necessary medical care. All these facts are obvious to us as a church because we see our own people and our communities suffering; we see and experience the punishing, numbing Israeli military occupation. The ELCJ church council meetings are sporadic at best; the ELCJ synod has not met since Jan. 18, 2002, due to closures and curfews. In the midst of our own suffering we also condemn the acts of violence against innocent people, as in the recent tragic attack in Haifa. We see the spiral of violence and hatred increasing and want to do everything possible with God's help to stop it and build a reconciling peace.

Please note what other voices are also saying about this crisis.

A. From the World Bank, "Two Years of Intifada, Closures and Palestinian Economic Crisis: An Assessment," March 5, 2003:

"The economic crisis has seriously compromised household welfare. Many families have endured long periods without work or incomes. . . Many now depend on food aid for their daily survival. Coping with the situation has meant selling assets, borrowing from families, neighbors and shopkeepers and cutting consumption, including food.

"Using a poverty line of US\$2.00 per day, the World Bank estimated that 21 per cent of the Palestinian population were poor on the eve of the intifada (third quarter of 2000), a number that increased to about 60 per cent by December 2002. Accounting for population growth, the numbers of the poor have tripled, from 637,000 to just less than 2 million. The poor are getting poorer. In 1998, the average daily consumption of a poor person was equivalent to US\$1.47 per day. This has now slipped to US\$1.32. More than 75 per cent of the Gaza Strip is now poor.

"The health status of the Palestinian population has deteriorated measurably. Real per capita food consumption has dropped by up to 30 per cent since September 2000. A recent survey indicated that 13.3 per cent of the population of Gaza suffers from acute malnutrition, similar to levels found in Zimbabwe (13 per cent) and Congo (13.9 per cent).

"Adolescents are particularly vulnerable. Of an age to understand the economic hardship that their families face, but generally too young and inexperienced to be able to help much, they are particularly susceptible to trauma and to feelings of powerlessness and rage. Teachers are reporting an increase in violent behavior at school; many adolescents see no sense in continuing their education."

(quoted from page 3 of the report, found on www.worldbank.com)

B. From the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, noted in the Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre:

Regarding rampant unemployment in the West Bank and Gaza Strip --

In the fourth quarter of 2002, 36 per cent of the Palestinian work force was unemployed, which amounted to 314,000 unemployed people.

Prior to the intifada, in the third quarter of 2000, 170,000 people were unemployed. (general information from www.jmcc.org)

C. From Christian Aid, "Losing Ground: Israel, Poverty and the Palestinians," January 2003:

Christian Aid points to the key structures creating poverty in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip:

Loss of land – After the Oslo accords, agreement on Israeli military control meant that Israel controlled 82.8 per cent of Palestinian territory in the West Bank and Gaza.

Israeli settlements – Almost 42 per cent of the West Bank is controlled by Israeli settlements and regional municipal councils.

Water – Israeli control over water access limits Palestinian use ... Israeli allocation of water is five times that of Palestinians (with a contrast of 3.2 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza to 207,000 Israeli settlers in the same

areas, figures which do not include East Jerusalem – population information from B'Tselem, The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. www.btselem.org).

Closure and curfew – Since the second intifada, a tightening of the Israeli network of military checkpoints and roadblocks has placed over three million Palestinians under virtual siege. Villages are cut off from one another; it is often impossible to travel from one part of the West Bank to another, as well as between the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Lack of strong self-government – The Palestinian Authority has been unable to tackle poverty and develop accountable institutions for a wide variety of reasons. Tax revenues for the PA are withheld by Israel and this, coupled with the destruction by Israel of much of the PA infrastructure, has contributed to a breakdown in government functions.

(general information from p. 6 of the report, found on www.christian-aid.org.uk)

2. ELCJ Preparedness for War

Bishop Younan describes the general attitude of Israelis and Palestinians toward the possible war in Iraq:

“We are living in a situation where people are divided in their opinions and preparedness for possible war in Iraq. I see the Israelis taking the threat of war so seriously that it seems overstated. Every day there are predictions pinpointing the day the war will start. Many precautions involving distribution of gas masks, food and water are taking place; some Israeli people are very frightened while others try to have a more calming attitude. In the Palestinian society I see and hear a belief that the war will not really happen. There is a kind of denial among people, ignoring threats and not taking many precautions. It is also part of the overall exhaustion of dealing with the ongoing Israeli occupation.”

Bishop Younan believes the ELCJ must help its member families and others who work for the ELCJ, particularly in the schools, to be prepared for strict closures and curfews during a war in Iraq. It is already apparent around Palestinian towns, for example, that many roads in and out of the towns are being blocked, leaving perhaps only one road available. It will then be easy for the Israeli military to close the one road, keeping all Palestinians closed in. A 24-hour curfew can then keep everyone in his or her homes.

The ELCJ wants to equip our people with material aid in this highly dangerous time, particularly as it adds to the already devastating humanitarian situation described in the first section of this newsletter. Bishop Younan has made urgent appeals to Lutheran church partners (COCOP) around the world for financial aid to give even the minimum amount of help to nearly 500 families. We hope we can give this help before the war begins.

Another aspect of preparedness for war is happening at the ELCJ Lutheran Good Shepherd Church in Amman, Jordan. The bishop offered the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) and Action by Churches Together (ACT) the use of the Lutheran church guesthouse as a center for the operation of ACT humanitarian aid to Iraqi people. The Lutheran guesthouse has been refurbished and is currently in use by many volunteers with various skills and expertise who are in Amman to assist in humanitarian aid.

Many expatriates and missionaries from various countries who serve here have already left us during the wartime; very few remain. We have been told this is because of insurance reasons. We want to thank the individuals and their mission boards of various churches who have decided to stay with us. Their presence is a solidarity with the people and a strong witness in this time of crisis.

3. A Bright, Happy Spot in Lutheran Ministry in Old City Jerusalem

As was mentioned in the February 2003 ELCJ newsletter, the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Old City of Jerusalem has re-opened the Day Center for the Elderly in the former Martin Luther School premises, aided by a grant from the Commission of the European Communities.

Monday, March 10, was the official re-opening celebration of the day center and nearly 150 elderly people attended along with the staff, volunteers and other guests. A noon meal was served and a band provided music for listening and, in some cases, for dancing! Conversation, arts, crafts and games were enjoyed.

Rev. Ibrahim Azar, pastor of the Redeemer Lutheran Congregation, is the director of the center. Abeer Rabady is the assistant director. Also on the staff are a social worker, a nurse, a physical therapist and various volunteers. Abeer states that 90 women and 78 men come to the day center during the course of a week. The center is open from 9:30 am to 2:00 pm, Monday through Saturday. Another 110 elderly people unable to come to the center are visited in their homes.

Various activities including fitness, medical tests and exercises, handcrafts and games as well as classes in reading and writing, newspaper reading, the law and legal rights, the Bible and First Aid are offered during the week. Physical therapy is also offered, and there is much opportunity for conversation, discussion and interaction.

4. Bishop Younan at the Lutheran World Federation Pre-Assembly in Asia

From March 2-6, 2003, the leaders of the 46 Lutheran church bodies in Asia (with a membership of 7½ to 8 million Lutherans) gathered in Medan, Indonesia, for the Asian LWF Pre-Assembly. The upcoming international LWF Assembly will take place in July 2003 in Winnipeg, Canada. Bishop Younan gave the keynote address at the Asian assembly: "For the Healing of the World: What is the Role of the Church?" (See the ELCJ web site, www.holyland-lutherans.org, for the text of the bishop's address.) Ms Dahlia Habash of the ELCJ also attended the pre-assembly as a delegate.

The Lutheran churches in Asia are the result of Lutheran mission work done in the nineteenth century and are both sending and receiving churches. The Christian people in Asia live as a minority in societies that are multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-racial. The Lutheran church witness has survived all sorts of turbulences and difficulties, continuing their witness to Christ. In Indonesia, for example, there are twelve Lutheran church bodies; the largest is the HKBP with three million members.

“I am encouraged by their fresh witness,” Bishop Younan stated. *“When I hear how the Asian Lutherans cope with their problems, I am encouraged to continue ministry in my own context. These Asian churches have a future for mission, for proclaiming the Word of God, for diaconia. They teach us about the pluralistic nature of the struggling church, the church of martyria. We thank God when we see it – how God is working in God’s own way in Asia. The 46 Lutheran churches in Asia, including the ELCJ, have pledged ourselves to pray for one another.”*

Also, Bishop Younan related how his Old Testament reading and blessing in Arabic at the Sunday worship service in the Asian LWF Pre-Assembly Consultation in Medan were carried on Indonesian television. Bishop Younan had been surprised and pleased to be invited by the HKBP bishop to give the closing blessing in Arabic because it is proper for the bishop of the indigenous church body to give this blessing. All the Lutheran churches in Medan were present at the service as well as all twelve Lutheran bishops of the twelve Indonesian church bodies. Over television the largely Muslim population of Indonesia was learning, perhaps for the first time, that there are Arab Christians and not only Muslims and Jews living in Israel and Palestine. It was also a surprise for them to realize there are Arab Christians who speak in the language of the Koran, who praise and bless God in Arabic. The Indonesian Christians felt this was a big encouragement in their own witness and struggle in their society. *“I had simply spoken in my mother tongue,”* Bishop Younan stated. *“It was another example of how a Christian’s mere presence is a vital, living witness.”*

5. Reflections on “War? Or No War?”

Certainly we are in no position to predict whether there will or will not be a war in Iraq. It is questionable whether the world leaders and politicians are decided. Bishop Younan states,

“The divisions regarding the threats of war are a matter of concern to us. Are those opposing the war in fear of their own interests or are they in fear of the dangers of the war itself and the post-war situation? The actual war undoubtedly means bloodshed, catastrophe, bitterness and hatred. Every person is valuable; every drop of human blood is too precious to waste.

“Those who say ‘no war’ see the world being in a worse condition if there is war, with the international will flaunted. Those who say ‘yes’ to war apparently believe the violence and extremism will end by attacking and bombing Iraq. But isn’t it true that if we give in to war that we will simply create another platform on which violence and extremist will proliferate?”

"I am here to tell you that Palestinians are exhausted from oppression and injustice that take the form of war right here in Palestine and Israel. We of all people know war's terrible toll and the consequences of violence and extremism. We plead with the world not to try to solve one problem at the expense of another, leaving only a bleak future for everyone. May God give us strength and courage to work for truth, justice and a genuine peace through peaceful means."

*"Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5)
Lord God, let justice stream forth for every nation in the Middle East.*

Noted by Rev. Dr. Mary E. Jensen

Communications Assistant to Bishop Dr. Munib A Younan, ELCJ

Bishop Younan: ga_elcj@netvision.net.il

Rev. Mary Jensen: inasmuch@aol.com

www.holyland-lutherans.org