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The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan

URGENT MESSAGE

from

Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan
Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem of the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan,
working in Jerusalem, Palestine, Jordan and Israel
April 5, 2002

PLEASE NOTE: The short press release made in the evening of April 4 and the longer story about the invasion of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church compound are both included in this message.

URGENT PRESS RELEASE

April 4, 2002

At 1:45 pm Thursday afternoon, April 4, 2002, three groups of Israeli Defense Force (IDF) soldiers entered the compound of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem. When Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb heard the soldiers entering, he telephoned the bishop in Jerusalem, alerting him to the impending danger to the property, to him and to his family. Bishop Dr. Munib Younan immediately began making telephone calls to the Israeli military and government authorities and various diplomatic corps, demanding that the soldiers be removed from the church property and that Rev. Raheb and his family be kept safe. The Christmas Church is one of six ELCJ congregations. The soldiers went from room to room in the compound for nearly two hours, breaking into offices and detaining Rev. Raheb in a corner of his office. When the soldiers heard Rev. Raheb speaking in Arabic on his telephone, their treatment of him became more rude and rough, according to the pastor's account of his experience. He was then prevented from using the telephone. Finally a second commander arrived who ordered the soldiers out, spoke kindly with Rev. Raheb and assured him that he and his family would be safe. The commander and some of the soldiers then secured broken windows and doors facing the street so the property would be protected. The gift shop could not be secured because two tank shells had wreaked considerable damage. The soldiers left at about 4:10 pm.

We in the Lutheran church denounce such acts and demand that the international community and the State of Israel secure the protection and the sanctity of church compounds and properties.

Noted by Rev. Dr. Mary E. Jensen
Communications Assistant for the ELCJ

For more information, call Rev. Gustaf Odquist at +972 - 2- 67-255733

DETAILED STORY OF CHRISTMAS CHURCH INVASION April 5, 2002

It is with great relief that we are able to report that Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb and his family are safe today after a two and one-half hour incursion into the Lutheran church compound by Israeli Defense Force (IDF) soldiers yesterday, April 4, 2002.

According to Rev. Dr. Raheb, he heard the soldiers entering the compound at about 1:45 pm. The compound consists of the pastor's residence, offices, a guesthouse, a gift shop, an artists' workshop and meeting rooms. Under construction is a conference center. Much of the compound has been financed by partner churches. The compound had been damaged on Tuesday, April 2, when the IDF re-occupied Bethlehem with tanks, bulldozers and troops. Rev. Raheb had quickly inspected the damage on Wednesday, but was unable to inspect the church building itself as the danger from snipers was too great. As of Thursday, a quick look from outside the church showed only one minor stained glass window broken, but a complete inspection will have to wait until the troops are gone and the danger is over.

Rev. Raheb telephoned the office of Bishop Dr. Munib Younan as soon as he heard the soldiers entering which allowed the bishop to begin making phone calls protesting the incursion. Several short phone conversations with Rev. Raheb as the incursion continued enabled the bishop and his staff to give up to the moment reports in phone calls to the Israeli military and the government as well as to European and American diplomats and heads of churches. Bishop Younan was demanding that the soldiers be removed from the church property and that Rev. Raheb and his family be kept safe. By 4:10 pm the ordeal of incursion for Rev. Raheb and his family was over. A second IDF commander had come and ordered the soldiers out of the church compound.

Following is a report of the conversation held with Rev. Raheb after the soldiers left.

Three different groups of Israeli soldiers entered the property, each group consisting of fifteen men. Rev. Raheb shouted at them from the second floor, "Get out! This is a

church. I want to talk to your commander.” The soldiers were breaking down doors and saying, “This is not a church.” Rev. Raheb continued to speak to them, saying, “I am the pastor of the church. I want to come down and talk to you. Do not shoot.” He was wearing his clergy garb, easily recognizable as a pastor.

At that point Rev. Raheb did go down to the ground floor and spoke with the commander, insisting this was church property. The commander said they needed to inspect a particular house, pointing at it. This house was not a part of the compound and Rev. Raheb took one group of soldiers out to the street to show them how the house was not located on the compound. In the meantime, another group of soldiers was breaking down office doors, searching through the property.

The IDF deputy commander for the Bethlehem area called Rev. Raheb on mobile phone, a result of the bishop’s insistent phone calls. The commander asked to speak with the soldiers but they would not take the mobile phone and talk to him. The breaking of doors and searching continued. Rev. Raheb was continually asking to speak more with the commander in the compound.

By this time the soldiers were on the second floor, now in Rev. Raheb’s office searching through drawers and files. The pastor’s telephone rang, and this time it was the bishop inquiring about the pastor’s situation. Rev. Raheb later said, “I believe they thought I was an expatriate pastor until they heard me speaking Arabic and realized I was Palestinian. Then their attitude and actions toward me changed for the worse.” They closed off the telephone, later taking his mobile phone, too. “Now you are detained,” they said, forcing Rev. Raheb to sit in a corner of his own office. “Don’t talk.” When Rev. Raheb continued to speak and one of the soldiers replied, the soldier was reprimanded by the others. Rev. Raheb reported that the soldiers’ language was vulgar and nasty, cursing Arabs and making threats. This was the most alarming time for the pastor because this group of soldiers seemed out of control. The search in the pastor’s office continued for about an hour.

At one point the soldiers let Rev. Raheb go to his home to get keys to open an iron door leading to the construction project. He was able to speak with his frightened wife and family momentarily before returning to his office with the keys. Once they had opened the door the pastor was ordered to sit once again while they searched the construction site. Much of this area had already been damaged and vandalized on Tuesday, Rev. Raheb reported.

About two hours into the incursion, another IDF commander arrived. His attitude toward Rev. Raheb was completely different, speaking kindly to him. “You are not responsible for anything,” the commander said. “Don’t worry, you are safe.” This commander ordered the soldiers out of the compound, but before they left the commander and a few soldiers did some repair work on the doors and windows immediately facing the street. It was at this point that Rev. Raheb was able to go outdoors and see what damage had been done, noting one minor stained glass window in the church was broken. The gift shop area in the compound has sustained the worst damage. Part of the building itself was destroyed and the door to the gift shop could not be repaired.

While he was outside Rev. Raheb was told by neighbors that mines had been planted in the streets of the Old City by the soldiers, some of which had already exploded. The IDF commander confirmed this. Reporters had begun to gather near the church but the pastor was told not to talk to them, and by the time the soldiers left the reporters had gone. Rev. Raheb told the commander that he was concerned the soldiers would return but the officer said that wouldn't happen, and a mark was made on the building which indicated to soldiers that this building had been inspected and was safe.

Throughout the experience, Rev. Raheb insisted to the soldiers and the commanders that the church does not allow armed people to enter the premises. The church compound was not used for fighting, only for helping people in need.

Although very shaken, Rev. Raheb reported that he and his family were safe. The damage and destruction done to the church compound, however, were very extensive. We denounce such attacks and demand from the Israeli government protection and sanctity of churches and church property.

Noted by Rev. Dr. Mary E. Jensen

For further information, please contact Rev. Gustaf Odquist
Mobile: +972-2-67-255-733