

YOU CAN SEE IT IN THEIR EYES: PALESTINIAN LIVES MATTER!

So far so good? The agreed ceasefire has been sustained for the past week in Gaza and Israel, and the necessary and burdensome reconstruction of the colossal damage done to buildings can restart all over again for Gazans who have lived in the largest 'open-air prison' in recent history! However, the human cost remains unquantifiable for all sides even though at times the biased 'Western' media had portrayed Israeli lives as far more precious than Palestinian lives. Here, perhaps, lies the root of the problem.

If Palestinian lives do matter at all, why has the illegal military occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and the blockade of Gaza, persist over such a long time with total disregard for international law, international humanitarian law, and numerous UN Security Council resolutions? For two afternoons this week, the Balfour Project held a conference on the search for the rule of law in Israel/Palestine and two themes (among others) stood out among the expert speakers: the Israeli State's draconian actions have gone on with impunity, and its lack of accountability before the international community.

On this very day, many Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem, are still living in fear and anxiety as to whether they can remain in their houses where they have lived for generations. Will the Israeli Jewish settlers win the day in the High Court? Here, ironically, the tenuous claim of a 'right of return' might be invoked. Yet, for the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and their descendants who were driven from their homes – the *Nakba/Catastrophe* of 1948 – their 'right of return' to their ancestral homes in Israel remains at best an illusion.

This is just the tip of the iceberg, as many readers will begin to appreciate by now, given the news coverage and analyses from all shades of opinion. Today the facts on the ground, to name a few, are clear – the illegal expansion of settlements, the much restricted movement [through all sorts of checkpoints] for workers, farmers, students and ordinary Palestinians, the disproportionate use of retaliatory force upon Palestinian protestors, the increasing number of house and other structural demolitions, the use of detention of minors, the critical lack of access to water alongside the continuing confiscation of arable/fertile land – testifying to the reality of human rights abuses and the contravention of international and humanitarian law.

In this increasingly 'apartheid' situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, life goes on despite the daily presence of the military. It is ever more significant to realise that what is now thought of as 'normalisation of occupation' (almost 54 years) is in fact most abnormal and unjust. Yet, most Palestinians persevere with their daily living in peaceful resistance through the virtue of *sumud*, an Arabic term that is difficult to translate.

At the height of the recent battles in Gaza, a young woman interviewed live spoke courageously about the 'right to resist' while the world's attention was constantly drawn towards Israel's 'right to defend itself' against Hamas's rockets. The former is a narrative that needs more airing and exposition than the latter overworked narrative of Israel's security concerns.

This is further supported by the fact that there are within Israel many activists whose voices are often subdued or never heard. They are a significant 'silent' minority whose views and actions for cause of justice are often labelled anti-Israel or unpatriotic. For many of them, including older women, lawyers, rabbis, journalists, ex-military personnel, persisting with their work has come with considerable personal cost. Only last Saturday, an ex-helicopter rescue pilot of the Israeli air force spoke movingly that "you cannot kill the spirit that wants to be free"!

I am ever thankful to the Northern Synod Trust chair and directors for granting me special leave to participate in the World Council of Churches' physically and emotionally demanding Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme for Palestine and Israel from December 2015 to February 2016, based in the troubled city of Bethlehem.

Besides other pressing duties, for four days a week my international colleagues and I monitored the main checkpoint that links Jerusalem to Bethlehem. This permanent and huge checkpoint, Checkpoint 300, is one of the many along the infamous Wall or 'Separation Barrier'. We witnessed the humiliating treatment in which thousands of Palestinian workers are subjected to when they cross the checkpoint. Amidst this humiliating experience, I have found the workers to be mostly good-natured and at times good-humoured. It demonstrates their resilience where, for five days a week, month after month, year after year, they endure such an unnecessary experience to cross 'to the other side' (meaning Israel) to maintain a livelihood for the sake of their families and themselves.

So, I felt inspired one early Sunday (first day of the working week where the rush is normally intense) morning in January 2016 to pen the following words, and how one's eyes often resonate with one's identity. I hope you will be able to read it imaginatively and prayerfully, for both Muslim and Christian Palestinians persevering in their struggle for liberation, that they might first be able to see the tunnel and then the light within.

You can see it in their eyes ...
Eyes of determination
Eyes of desperation
Eyes looking forlorn
Eyes of hope
Eyes of responsibility
The occupation must end!

You can see it in their eyes ...
Seeking eyes
Cheeky eyes
Playful eyes
Acknowledging eyes
Tired eyes
The occupation must end!

You can see it in their eyes ...
Eyes of waiting
Eyes of solidarity
Eyes of youth
Eyes of age
Eyes of prayer
The occupation must end!

You can see it in their eyes ...
Pushing eyes
Wearied eyes
Worried eyes [father, with an infant in his arms]
Friendly eyes
Haunting eyes
Ihtilal, ihtilal, ihtilal * ...
The Occupation must end!

[* transliterated Arabic word for "occupation"]