

## *Jerusalem Journal – 12<sup>th</sup> May 2007*

Well the new team of Ecumenical Accompaniers (EAs) have now taken over, and I will be leaving Jerusalem in a couple of days. It has been quite difficult saying goodbye to Israeli and Palestinian friends that we have made during the last three months. Our last visit to the Youth Centre in Shufat Refugee camp, which we have been visiting every week, was particularly hard.

I had thought that this last journal letter would be a reflective piece on my three months here in Jerusalem, however events this week, as we prepared to hand over to the new team of EAs, got the better of that idea.

Both of the pictures in this journal letter are taken from almost exactly the same position, in the Wadi Joze area of East Jerusalem, at the bottom hill that leads up to where we have been living on the Mount of Olives. The first picture, which was taken on Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> of May, shows a centre for Autistic and Special needs children. The second picture, taken one week later on Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> May, shows the centre completely demolished.

The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD) had warned us a few weeks ago that the children's centre was going to be demolished by Israeli authorities. So, last week we had made a visit to see the centre and meet some of the staff.



*How the centre looked exactly one week before it was demolished*

Photo credit: John Sharp/EAPPI

The centre hosted children for two week special stays, and was also afternoon day-care centre for children. The building had undergone various alterations and renovations to make it suitable for children with special needs.

**John Sharp – Ecumenical Accompanier, EAPPI**

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A week after our visit to the centre we were called by one of the members of staff we had met, and told that two Israeli army bulldozers had just destroyed their centre.



*A member of the centre's staff salvages some equipment from the ruins*

Photo credit: John Sharp/EAPPI

As we arrived at the site we were met by shocked staff and local residents who told us that Israeli soldiers and police had arrived just after 5am, had broken the door of the centre down and entered with dogs. A soldier carried one physically disabled child out from the centre, before the bulldozers began to destroy the building. One local resident living beside the centre who complained about the way the soldiers and police were behaving was beaten by a soldier with his rifle butt, and arrested.

The centre was demolished because it was built without the necessary documents or permits. However after Israel occupied East Jerusalem in 1967 they have very rarely given any permits to Palestinians to build any kind of structures. According to ICAHD, since 1967 Israel has demolished almost 12,000 Palestinian homes, leaving some 70,000 without shelter and traumatised.

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On a reflective note... what does the future look like here in Jerusalem and the occupied Palestinian territory? One of my colleagues in the Jerusalem team of EAs, who comes from Durban, has reminded me more than once that the apartheid system in South African ended rather unexpectedly and quicker than most people there could have imagined. Could the occupation of Palestine and the human rights violations that accompany it, end as quickly as the apartheid system fell in South Africa?

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As I draw to the end of my time working in Jerusalem it seems difficult to believe this could happen - when you see the separation barrier (or as Palestinians describe it, the “Apartheid Wall”) still being built, when in only three months you see checkpoints that each day humiliate Palestinians being fortified, or when you stand in the rubble of what used to be a centre for autistic and special needs children.

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