

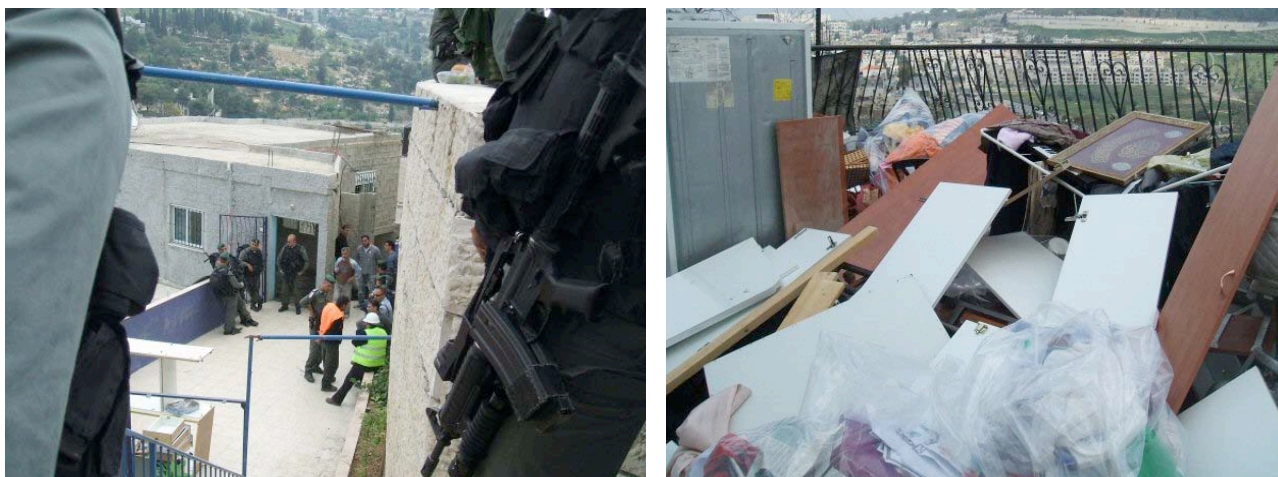
Jerusalem Journal – 21 April 2007

It has been a very busy fortnight for the Jerusalem Ecumenical Accompanier (EA) team. Last Wednesday we were contacted by the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD) requesting our presence at the site of a house that Israeli authorities were preparing to demolish in East Jerusalem.

The site actually turned out to be directly opposite the walls of the Old City, and on the road up to the Mount of Olives. It was a little strange having tourists mingling around the area – oblivious to what was going on just yards away.

We arrived to find the house surrounded by Israeli soldiers and police, with the family (including young children) being held outside their house. Six engineers were waiting with pneumatic drills, to begin the demolition. All the family's belongings had been unceremoniously dumped outside the house by the army, with items of furniture clearly broken. We asked if we could speak to the family, but we were not allowed access to the house.

Half an hour after we had arrived, the owner of the house brought a receipt from the local post office for 30,000 shekels that he had paid to reprieve the house from demolition. After studying the receipt the army and police left, and we were finally able to go and talk to the family.



Soldiers surrounded the house, having emptied the family's belongings outside

Photo credits: John Sharp/EAPPI

It was sad walking through the empty house, seeing the odd shoe and plastic bag lying on the floor. The family were understandably very distressed, the wife of the owner looked like she was in shock as she wondered round her empty home. She told us that she was dreading her older children returning from school and seeing all their things piled up outside the house.

As we talked with the family, some of them disappeared, coming back a few minutes later with orange juice that they offered to us to drink. That the family were still thinking about the hospitality that they should offer to visitors in the midst to all that was going on, seemed quite amazing.

According to ICAHD, since 1967 Israel has demolished 12,000 Palestinian homes - leaving 70,000 people without a home. For more information on the work of ICAHD, including their latest report on house demolitions in East Jerusalem see: www.icahd.org/eng/

John Sharp – Ecumenical Accompanier, EAPPI

For more information on the Ecumenical Accompanier Programme in Palestine and Israel:
www.quaker.org.uk/eappi

This week we attended an International Peace Conference in Bil'in (18 – 20th April), which included speakers from Northern Ireland, France, Italy, Israel and Palestine.

Bil'in is a small village of around 1,800 people just outside Ramallah. The Israeli government has taken nearly 60% of Bil'in's land for the construction of settlements and the separation barrier - in the process destroying more than 1000 olives trees belonging to the villagers, which in turn has destroyed the livelihoods of many of the villagers.

Yesterday, on the final day of the conference we were all invited to attend the weekly non-violent demonstration that takes place in the village.

Around 300 demonstrators – made up of Palestinians, Israeli's and internationals (including our group of five EAs), joined together with new Palestinian Authority Deputy Prime Minister Azzam Al Ahmed, in walking from the centre of the village to the separation barrier.



Photo credits: John Sharp/EAPPI

Although it was a completely peaceful demonstration (with many children taking part), Israeli soldiers who had gathered at the separation barrier decided to fire teargas, rubber bullets, and water canon. I witnessed teargas canisters being fired directly at people, in addition to being fired into the air. I saw three demonstrators, including one young woman, being injured, and we later heard that 24 people had been hurt. The response from the Israeli soldiers seemed completely excessive and unnecessary.



Teargas and rubber bullets were fired by the Israeli army, causing demonstrators to scatter

Photo credits: John Sharp/EAPPI

For more information on Bil'in, see www.bilin-village.org

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