

Jerusalem Journal – 28th April 2007

This week I spent a few days working with the Hebron team of Ecumenical Accompaniers (EAs).

It took me about an hour and half to get to Hebron - getting a bus from East Jerusalem to Bethlehem, then another bus south to Hebron. The EAs use public transport, i.e. buses, whenever we go anywhere – experiencing checkpoints and other restrictions on freedom of movement as Palestinians experience them *every* day.

The city of Hebron is home to around 150,000 Palestinians and between 400 - 500 Israeli settlers who live around the Old City area of Hebron, guarded by 2000 Israeli soldiers and a ring of checkpoints.

One of the main roles for the team of EAs in Hebron is the ‘school-run’ for the Cordoba School which is located in the Tel Rumeid area of Hebron, close to two Israeli settlements. Pupils and staff have to negotiate a checkpoint before walking along the deserted Shuhada street (which other than for the school children and staff is closed to non-Jewish pedestrians), and then up some steep steps and along a short path to the school (a recent article in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* noted that the Israeli Defence Forces are now investigating whether *they* have intentionally closed Shuhada street for the last six years - see <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/849690.html>).

An Israeli settlement sits just across the street from the school and pupils and staff attending the Cordoba School have been attacked on many occasions by the settlers – meaning that many children are now too scared to attend the school. As I talked to teachers and pupils at the school I could clearly see Israeli settlers walking on the street outside openly carrying machine guns! The school headmistress told me how grateful she was for the protective presence that the EAs provide, and said there would be less children at the school, and the children would not be as confident at the school if it were not for the EAs presence.



Morning break at the Cordoba School

Photo credit: John Sharp/EAPPI

John Sharp – Ecumenical Accompanier, EAPPI

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www.quaker.org.uk/eappi

The school children were clearly very happy to see us at the school. A teacher told me the horrifying story of one of the small boys who had come over to shake my hand, and ask me my name. The ten-year boy had been attacked by one of the Israeli settlers two years ago. The settler had grabbed the boy, forced a handful of stones into his mouth, and then shoved his face into a wall – breaking many of his teeth.

Just opposite the Cordoba School, on one of the metal door leading into a house, it had been written - “Gas the Arabs!”



Photo credit: John Sharp/EAPPI

After the ‘school run’ we walked around the Old City area of Hebron, and it seemed like just about every corner we walked around there was a checkpoint, military post, or some soldiers. I watched four middle-aged men (whom we later found out were teachers) being stopped in the middle of the street by an Israeli soldier who took their IDs and ordered them to stand in a corner while he checked their details. Twelve minutes later the soldier returned the IDs to the men and they were ushered away, allowed to get on with their lives again.

Living conditions looked extremely poor around the Old City. Since the start of the second Intifada in 2000, Palestinians here have been put under 15 months in total of curfew (during curfew they are only allowed out of their houses for a few hours). Many of the shops around the Old City have been forced to close. The Israeli human rights organisation, B'tselem, estimates that in the last six years, between 2000 - 2500 shops and businesses have been closed in the area. Walking down the market of the Old City area it actually felt like being in prison, with a steel net over the top of the street to protect people from rubbish, and rocks which are thrown by settlers (see picture below).



Photo credit: John Sharp/EAPPI

*****STOP PRESS***** In my journal letter last week I reported that 24 people had been injured when Israeli soldiers opened fire on peaceful protesters at Bil'in with teargas and rubber bullets. At the time of writing my journal I had been unaware that the Northern Irish Nobel Peace Prize winner, Mairead Maguire, had actually been shot in the leg by a rubber bullet.

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