

## **"Bethlehem Under Siege"**

There is no doubt that Bethlehem represents the most sacred symbols of Christianity. It is the ultimate pilgrimage for worshipers and scholars from all over the globe. Unfortunately, the Israeli aggression on Bethlehem, the brutal incursions and the long periods of unjust curfews have brought life to a standstill and exacerbated diverse socio-economic problems that have previously been under control.

Israel has responded brutally against the Palestinian Uprising (or Intifada). This response has brought economic disaster to the City; the newly built infrastructure has been totally flattened. Public and private homes, institutions and roads have been totally damaged. Losses are beyond the capacity of Bethlehem municipality. Even the most sacred Church, the Nativity, was besieged for more than 40 days in when it sustained damage and fire as the result of Israeli firing.

In addition to the physical damage to the infrastructure, unemployment has skyrocketed and reached an alarming rate. The political upheaval and the siege on Jerusalem, the twin sister of Bethlehem, have deprived Bethlehem from its main source of income, namely, tourism and inter-religious artifacts. The unjust closure and siege of Jerusalem which is supposed to be an open city to the three monotheistic religions, have prevented the flow of tourists to the city of Bethlehem. This closure means that the residents of Bethlehem are not allowed to enter Jerusalem that is a clear indication of the illegal and unlawful measure applied in the City. This measure has caused a sharp rise in unemployment that reached 70% and hindered the movement of workers and prevented them from reaching their workplace.

In addition, unemployment has also inflicted heavy damage on the fiber of the family. Parents are unable to meet the daily demands of their children and family; they are unable to pay school tuition or utility bills and cannot meet the daily expenses of a big family. Above all, parents are facing stark problems with their children. More and more children suffer from stress-related symptoms and trauma syndromes as the result of direct encounter with Israeli occupying forces. In that respect, parents are unable or feel helpless when confronting such cases that need direct intervention from specialists.

Having all these problems in mind, Bethlehem is suffering from an alarming trend of family and youth immigration, particularly Christians. The socio-economic situation has driven large numbers of families to leave Bethlehem and move to what they call the 'Promised Land'. It's thoroughly disturbing to see Bethlehemites leaving their hometown and losing their original heritage. What counts most to us in an ever-changing world are the human elements and the best way to preserve their identity and progress.

Another issue of great importance that can be considered the final nail in the coffin of Bethlehem prosperity and development is the expropriation of large acres of grove farms by the Israelis. The given reason for this unlawful confiscation is the erection of a "security fence" that swallows what is left of Bethlehem agricultural land. These confiscated sways of land are also what make up Bethlehem; it is the only natural geographical expansion to the City. It is unfortunate that the Israelis are targeting both human and natural resources in a bid to evacuate the land of its natural inhabitants. Without land and human resources the City of Bethlehem will lose any prospects of future progress and development.

As Palestinians living in Bethlehem we pray to God that peace and justice prevail over this Biblical land. We also call upon the international community to bring Israel back to the negotiating table and back to its senses. Our ultimate goal is and will be justice for all nations.