

## **Daily Life in Bethlehem Since the April 1, 2002 Siege Began**

Friday May 10, was the 39th day of the siege of Bethlehem by the Israeli military. We have been under a 24-hour, continuous curfew. We have not been allowed to look out of our windows at the Israeli soldiers or their tanks and military equipment. Even though we are not allowed to look, the noises of war are a constant reminder of what is happening. We are often awakened throughout the night to the sounds of machine gun fire, sound grenades, tank shells, and other explosive noises. For days now we have been confined to our homes, unable to go out even to get rid of the garbage. Because every day is the same as the day before, we have to intentionally remind ourselves of what day it is. A Sunday doesn't feel like a Sunday, anymore, since we are not allowed out of our homes to attend church. Our nights are filled with nightmares of war to accompany the sounds of war. Our days are filled with finding creative ways to make food last, with making our own bread, and with entertaining our children. Once or twice a week the Israeli military lift the curfew for a few hours so that we can forage for whatever food is still available in Bethlehem. We are like prisoners being allowed out of our cells for a few hours of fresh air, and the incongruity of Spring bringing new life all around us is even more remarkable because we are prevented from enjoying it.

Over 100,000 Palestinians have been imprisoned in their homes since April 1. This has disrupted every aspect of society. The most visible disruption is the prevention of regular garbage collection. One month's worth of garbage for 100,000 people is lying on the streets, often being strewn along the streets by Israeli tanks and APC's (Armored Personnel Carriers) as they go by. Where the Israeli military machinery has broken water pipes or sewage pipes, there is water and raw sewage running openly down the streets, creating both a dangerous health hazard as well as a terrible stench. Most people have lost both power, water, and telephone lines for at least a portion, if not all, of the past 32 days. This past winter has been better than past seasons in terms of rain. The hills are green and the crops are good, but farmers are prevented from attending to their crops and animals by the curfew imposed on all of us.

The people of Bethlehem have been able to work only sporadically in the past 20 months, and not at all during the month of April. Bethlehem depends on tourism to stimulate their economy. Many families are now forced to exist on less than \$2 a day, and there is no work, few resources, and little relief in sight for most Palestinians, even after the siege ends.

Medical care, as we knew it has ceased to exist. Those who have medical emergencies may only receive care after calling the Red Cross, who then call the Israeli military to get permission to send an ambulance to the one in need. This process can take anywhere from 1 hour, if you're lucky, to half a day. Or, the request for medical assistance can be denied altogether at the whim those who have decision-making power within the Israeli army. And, ambulances on the way to the hospital are routinely stopped and searched by Israeli soldiers.

People who have died, whether from natural causes or as a result of war, are denied funerals and burial. Those who grieve, grieve in isolation under curfew, and without the comfort of family and friends.

Our children have now missed a month's worth of school. When children are finally able to return to school again, they will be returning as victims of trauma. Most will suffer from the trauma of living with daily fear from machine gun fire, tank shelling, and explosions, and the never-ending uncertainty, which accompanies a situation that makes you feel like a sitting duck. Will our home be the recipient of the next tank shell, or will bullets come through my window, exploding glass in every direction? Many children will also suffer from the trauma of having their homes searched by patrols of Israeli soldiers, or of having fathers, brothers, or sisters being taken from their homes to be detained by the government of Israel for an indefinite period of time.

As Orthodox Christians celebrate Easter, we remember the suffering of Christ as he was branded a criminal and nailed to the cross. Palestinians are no strangers to suffering. But, as God promised there would be a resurrection, so to are we looking forward to the day when the occupation and domination of Israelis over Palestinians will only be a memory. What a change the world would experience if those with power learned to use that power wisely, to the benefit of all, instead of using it for the destruction and suffering of so many.