

Jerusalem Diary

October - December 2006

Palestinians and internationals living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip issued a 'travel warning' on 10 December, inviting pilgrims to come to the city of Bethlehem for the holiday season, but telling them they may face difficulty at Israeli points of entry.

The Campaign for the Right of Entry/Re-Entry to the Occupied Palestinian Territory has been raising awareness since its establishment this summer about **a new Israeli crackdown that prevents Palestinians with foreign passports or the foreign spouses of Palestinians from living in the occupied territories.**

Without a formal process for attaining work and residency in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, those affected have been living as tourists, leaving through Israeli borders every three months in order to renew their visas or staying on illegally. Now Israeli officials are turning down these visa requests by the hundreds. The issue came to the attention of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and the Israeli cabinet reportedly decided to "normalize" the status of 5,000 foreign passport holders.

Since the decision, however, **the process designated for attaining a temporary residency permit through Israeli offices has been blocked**, with hundreds of applicants being refused.

The gradual completion of the complex of walls, guard towers, fences and patrol roads that Israel is building through Jerusalem's Palestinian neighborhoods has made it more difficult for international passport holders without Israeli visas to move in the occupied West Bank. Israeli soldiers check IDs and passports at various points along the structure. More than 500 checkpoints and road barriers are now dividing communities in the West Bank.

Israeli news reports on 11 December said that **Jewish settlers living in the West Bank will be aided in their passage of these checkpoints by a new computerized system.** "Eligible residents" will register with the Israeli military. Upon arriving at a crowded checkpoint, they will dial a toll-free number, enter a secret code, and then be allowed to pass. The new system will go into effect on December 31 at the Qalqilia crossing through the barrier into Israel.

Slowly, data is emerging about the real impact of the barrier on Jerusalem's residents. Fearful of being left on the West Bank side of the structure and losing their right to visit and work in the city, **many Jerusalemites are moving into the city's already-crowded neighborhoods.** The wave is driving up prices and vacating the suburbs that developed in between Ramallah and Jerusalem.

The Israeli Jerusalem municipality is bussing 3,500 students to Jerusalem's schools, reported the Associated Press in a December article, but 15,000 live on the West Bank side of the wall.

Al-Ram, with 62,000 residents with Jerusalem documents, now has vacancies in one in five apartments, and local tax revenues have dropped by two-thirds, the town mayor told the wire service.

Forty percent of Palestinian residents of Jerusalem have found themselves on the "wrong" side of the defacto border. **The barrier has left 60,000 Palestinians within the expanded city limits on the West Bank side of services and access.** Some 25,000 residents in Kufr Aqab near Ramallah cross the Qalandia terminal, built into an eight-meter-high wall.

The Israeli municipality has constructed a post office and motor-vehicle and licensing center at the Qalandia terminal to serve these Jerusalemites.

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, **64 of 981 Jerusalem area families questioned in a survey this summer said they moved in the past four years because of the barrier.**

While Israel has nearly completed its construction of a \$74 million light rail service connecting the Old City of Jerusalem with Tel Aviv and points north, a Dutch bank has withdrawn from the project because it traverses "occupied territory."

The Hague-based ASN Bank recently divested itself of its holdings in the French firm Veolia Transport that is a key part of the CityPass group building Jerusalem's light-rail system, because the project "is not in line with the United Nation's demand to stop all support for Israel's settlement activities."

On 22 November, track was laid on a 13.8 km section of the project running from the Jewish settlement of Pisgat Ze'ev to Mount Herzl in West Jerusalem. The state-of-the-art light-rail project is slated to open 5 January, 2009.

On 5 December, Israeli forces brought in bulldozers and demolished two Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem, one in al-Tor and another in Ras al-Amoud.

The leveling of the Abu Ghalia home rendered a family of four children homeless.

Ghadeer Abu Ghalia said that soldiers and policemen entered their house and forced them to leave in 15 minutes. "My children were sleeping, but the soldiers said they would demolish the house over our heads if we don't leave immediately," Abu Ghalia told the International Middle East Media Center. "I called my lawyer and informed him on what was going on."

His lawyer was able to get a stop-work order, but not before the home was already rubble.

The building demolished in Ras al-Amoud was still under construction. In this case, the owners reportedly had a

building license, but the military refused to examine it. Israeli officials say they demolished homes that were constructed without the proper building licenses, but building permits are notoriously difficult and expensive to attain for Palestinians.

The al-Quds Center in Jerusalem reports that **42 Palestinian houses were demolished in Jerusalem in 2006.**

Al-Quds University pulled off a major feat on November 25 and 26, holding a well-attending international conference on Palestinian refugees with no international funding. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung was to sponsor the event, the university said, but inexplicably asked for the conference to be postponed one week before the conference date.

The conference hosted 30 participants from Lebanon, Jordan, Canada, and the UK. Scholars, negotiators and legal experts spoke at the event attended by several hundred members of the public.

In early November, **plans to hold an Israeli-sponsored gay pride parade in Jerusalem were canceled under the guise of security concerns,** after Israeli attacks in the Gaza Strip renewed Palestinian calls for revenge. The event was held in a stadium, relieving concerns of unrest in the streets over the event. Religious leaders as far-flung as the Vatican in Rome and as near as the Galilee had denounced the event.

Ultra-orthodox Jews, the most vocal opponents to the event, make up about a third of Jerusalem's population. They are the city's fastest-growing Jewish sector and control nearly half

of the city council's 31 seats. In 2003, Jewish residents elected their first ultra-Orthodox mayor (Palestinians have boycotted municipal elections since 1967).