

# Jerusalem Diary

January – April 2007

Between Israeli alterations to the area just outside the sealed Mugharbeh Gate, and alterations to introduce a tram system to the city, Jerusalem's face is rapidly changing.

In an unprecedented move, Jerusalem authorities on 6 February brought bulldozers to the platform of the Western Wall to renovate a walkway leading up to the area of the al-Aqsa Mosque. The move sparked criticism both in Israel and abroad, with the former head of antiquities at the site calling it unnecessary, and Arab and Muslim leaders denouncing changes in the status quo.

After Friday prayers on 6 February, 19 Israeli officers and 17 protesters were injured in clashes at the site, after Israeli police fired stun grenades and teargas at protesters.

One week later, the mayor of Jerusalem suspended the renovations pending the submission of official plans, but said that an archeological dig underway beneath the walkway's foundations would go on.

A February visit to the site showed digging ongoing beneath a tarp hiding the damaged portion of the walkway. Several rocks had fallen from the side of the structure during a snowstorm in 2004, damage that could have been fixed for NIS 50,000, said Meir Ben Dov, field director of Jerusalem excavations after 1967.

"But they did not do it," said Ben Dov. "Four months later, I heard that people were speaking that 'this is a chance. Let's rebuild it and move it out and bring fights in this area.'"

Ben Dov, no longer in his post, wrote letters to various political figures, concerned that the attempt to change the status quo would do great damage. "The archeological excavations are destroying the ramp."

The ramp was built by Suleiman the Magnificent. Some Israeli archeologists believe that just beneath the ramp lies a gate from the period of the second Jewish temple.

Churches for Middle East Peace wrote a letter of protest to Assistant Secretary of State David Welch and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, raising concerns about the move. The church leaders noted that some 10,000 people participated in Nazareth protests against the transformation, and reminded US officials of the aftermath of Ariel Sharon's visit to the Muslim compound in 2000, which sparked the second Palestinian uprising,

The letter urged the US government to strongly assert its official policy that the status of Jerusalem must be determined by negotiations rather than pre-emptive action, and that neither party should

undertake initiatives that could prejudice their outcome.

A dig in the area of Shufat where Israeli authorities claim to have found an ancient Jewish community also raised Palestinian concerns.

“We have to wonder about the accuracy and validity of the information and whether the discovery is political or academic,” said representative of the Palestinian antiquities ministry Yousef al-Natsheh. He reported that the Israeli antiquities ministry has been digging in Shufat area for years, and on Shufat Street since February.

“It is clear,” he told the Palestinian News Network, “that this announcement has political objectives.”

A French organization is seeking a legal injunction to prevent two French companies from participating in the construction of a light-rail project in East Jerusalem, reported Ynet on 15 March. The group referred to a French law allowing courts to intervene to prevent business agreements that violate public peace and good intentions, on the basis that the “project is aimed at connecting occupied Jerusalem and the Israeli settlements in west Jerusalem.”

The contract to build the train route was signed in 2005 with City Pass consortium, comprised of French train manufacturer Alstom, the operating company Connex’s (also French) subsidiary Veolia, the Israeli Construction and Infrastructures company, Ashtröm, and Israel’s Polar Investments.

City Pass spokesman Itsho Gur said that the light rail will be used by all residents of Jerusalem, whether they be Jews, Muslims and Christians.

At the same time, demolitions in Jerusalem are at an upswing, with Israeli army bulldozers destroying two Palestinian homes in Sur Bahir on 14 March. One week prior, the Israeli municipality issued demolition orders to some 20 homes in the area. On 24 January, Israeli authorities demolished two Palestinian homes in al-Sawahra al-Sharqiya, saying they were built without a permit.

Subsequent to the 2004 International Court of Justice ruling in The Hague, Palestinians are seeking means of demanding reparations from Israel for damages from the barrier that Israeli is constructing through the West Bank. In December of 2006, the United Nations established a process for ensuring that Palestinians would be compensated for damages incurred.

In his study, *Separation Wall in East Jerusalem – Economic Consequences*, Shir Hever, researcher for the Alternative Information Centre, estimated that the barrier has thus far resulted in \$1.2 billion dollars in losses to East Jerusalem Palestinians, \$194 million dollars annually.

The Jerusalem barrier is particularly damaging, reports the study, as it cuts through a major urban area, directly and adversely affecting over 200,000 people on a daily basis. It has caused household income for Palestinian families in East Jerusalem to fall by some 17.5 percent since construction began.

In the village of Sheikh Said, 25 homes sit empty after their residents left for areas of Jerusalem, rather than be separated from the city by the wall built in the area.

Sheikh Saad's population has dwindled to around 2,000, say residents. "These people stay at home all day, hopeless, with nothing to do and no money," taxi driver Mansour told *Reuters*. He himself moved to nearby Jabal Mukkabr. "Even if you open a grocery, who is going to buy from you?"

Palestinians scored a small victory against depopulation in a 11 February court ruling that ordered Jewish families that had occupied for three years an apartment building in Silwan to evacuate the premises. The settlers said that they would appeal the ruling.

Evacuation of the seven-story newly-constructed building would be a setback to efforts to expand the Jewish presence in the city. The government has been paying millions of dollars a year to provide eight Jewish families with security at the site.

In his Feb. 11 ruling, Judge Eliahu Zimra of the Jerusalem Court of Municipal Affairs ordered the settlers to leave the building by 15 April, and have the entrances sealed.

The families say they seek to re-establish a neighborhood of Yemenite Jews expelled in the 1936 revolt. Israeli human rights lawyer Danny Seidemann hailed the ruling as "the first time the rule of law has come down hard" on the settlers.

On 10 March, Wa'al Qaraawi was detained by Israeli police on Jerusalem's Salah Eddin Street for transporting a Palestinian with a West Bank identity card. He died in police custody and his family accused the police of beating him to death. Police reported that the man collapsed and died.

The uncle of the deceased, Jamal Qaraawi, said that the family heard from local residents that four police officers hit him in his chest with their guns.

Israeli officials report that an increasing number of Palestinians are seeking access to Jerusalem and Israel by applying for medical permission. There are few other means of gaining an Israeli military permit for travel for residents of the West Bank and Gaza.

"We got 81,000 Palestinians permits to enter Israel for health reasons in 2006, a rise of 61 percent from 2005," Israeli army official Dalia Bessa said in an interview with IRIN at her office in the military settlement of Beit El, near Ramallah.

Bessa believes the increase is due to the Israeli barrier, which limits Palestinians' movements, and the ongoing strike for back wages of Palestinian medical workers.