

An Appeal from Bethlehem

June 6, 2003

We, the undersigned, being mayors, heads of religious institutions, civil institutions and NGO's, convey to you our grave concern over the continued and intensified land confiscation activities of the Israeli authorities in the Bethlehem district. These actions only serve to increase tensions between the two peoples during a period of political dialogue designed to solve the issues we have faced for over 50 years. The aggressive actions of the Israeli authorities exploit the Palestinian public further, ensure instability and inhibit any viable progress between the Palestinians and Israelis.

In particular, the current policies of the Israeli Government are:

1. Severing the natural and holy connection between Bethlehem, the birth place of Jesus Christ, and the city of Jerusalem. The construction of a segregation wall on the northern side of the town of Bethlehem, and the closure of the main road between the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the holy places in Jerusalem deny Palestinians access to and freedom of religious expression;
2. The military order to annex Rachel's Tomb, one of the many important areas of religious, cultural and historic value to Bethlehem and the followers of the three strands of mono-theistic religion will further destroy the value of Bethlehem in terms of historical importance and tourism. The map handed to the residents by the IOF shows that only 18 dunams¹ are seized and confiscated by the state of Israel, while around 3000 dunams of land will be isolated behind the Wall. The area contains 35 buildings with a population of 500 inhabitants which will be isolated behind the segregation Wall. Agricultural lands are already bulldozed and shaved in this area, hundreds of trees were uprooted and trenches with razor wires were installed for claimed security reasons.
3. The on-going land grab of Palestinian areas for construction and expansion of Israeli colonies in the Bethlehem district through the confiscation of Palestinian owned lands. Colony expansion has been rapidly accelerating during the last year, despite international pressure for an immediate freeze of all such activity;
4. The open spaces in Bethlehem district, including agricultural lands, are decreasing rapidly through the construction of Israeli bypass roads connecting expanded Israeli colonies. Farming land is being systematically destroyed and land available to create a viable Palestinian state is being eroded. No state can possibly be founded on small, isolated pockets of land which have no contiguous relationship with other land areas designated as Palestinian territory;
5. The Israeli Military orders to seize the Greek Orthodox housing project in Beit Sahour and to halt the work on the Bethlehem University alumni housing project, claimed to be for military reasons, is an example of indirect transfer and threatens the existence of Christian Palestinians in Bethlehem district;

¹ 1 hectare = 10 dunams

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6. Abu Ghneim mountain, the only forest around Bethlehem city, was expropriated and has been leveled to allow the construction of the illegal Israeli colony of Har Homa;
7. The checkpoints and roadblocks which separate Palestinian neighbourhoods, particularly in the town of Beit Jala, west of Bethlehem city, deny Palestinian citizens the ability to reach the town centre by car or by any kind of public transport and is a clear example of discrimination against Palestinian citizens. Families are also being separated through the increase of checkpoints and road closures;
8. The massive migration from Bethlehem is a direct result of the Israeli actions against the Palestinian citizens of the district and is another example of transfer. Using the pressure of economic ruin, fear of injury, imprisonment and abuse are intentionally used to force the indigenous population from their land.

President George Bush's speech concerning the creation of a viable Palestinian state living side by side and in harmony with an Israeli state offered the foundations to a peaceful and final solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and to put an end to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. The 'Road Map' presented by the Quartet - The United States, the European Community, the United Nations and Russia - to the Palestinian and Israeli sides, is an initiative for a permanent two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was supported by the Palestinians with hopes that it will bring justice, freedom, peace and political stability to the region. A settlement will result in the emergence of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbours. This settlement will resolve the Israel-Palestinian conflict and end the occupation that began in 1967, and is based on the foundations of the Madrid Conference, the principle of land for peace and United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242, 338 and 1397, agreements previously reached by the parties, and the initiative of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah.

However, all Israeli activities over the past 36 years, and in particular the recent upsurge in land grabs in the district obstruct the viability of a Palestinian state, block the way forward of Bethlehem's future, sustainable development, and oppose the objectives mentioned in President Bush speech and the guidelines of the Quartet's Road Map.

Therefore, we ask the peace loving people of the world, Christian societies and the international community to demand an immediate cessation of these Israeli activities in Bethlehem, and support a fair implementation of the Road Map in order to put an end to the bloodshed and political conflict to bring stability, justice and peace between both Palestinians and Israelis.

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