

Build Bridges not Walls!¹ Aboud Village in West Bank

On Sunday 14 January 2006, I joined a delegation² of bishops making a pastoral visit in the small village of Aboud, West Bank. The Israeli fence or "Wall of Separation" will surround Aboud. This visit was part of a larger programme of the Holy Land Co-ordination in which presidents of bishops' conferences from North America and Europe participated (13 – 19 January 2006). Meetings took place in Israel, Palestine and Jordan. I made visits to Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Ramallah, Aboud and Taybeh in the West Bank, and to Amman, Dabouq and Madaba in Jordan. This article focuses on the difficult situation of a poor village in the West Bank, Aboud.

Israeli Security Needs

1. At the final session of the Co-ordination, Msgr. Pietro Sambì, the apostolic delegate to Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories³ stated, "Israel has the right for security. It has the right to build a wall across its borders. But Israel has **not** the right to take land from the Palestinians and to build a wall surrounding Palestinian cities and villages." The project of the wall in Aboud is going on and its construction is drawing near. The community will be deeply affected by the construction of the wall and it will end up in what is called "an open prison." One can understand Israeli's security needs, but we cannot see any connection between these needs and the project of the construction of the barrier which is going to create separate cantons or "ghettos" as some people call it.

Express Solidarity

2. Father Firas Aridah⁴ was waiting for the delegation before entering the church for saying mass with the parish. The church was packed with people and you could feel the strong appreciation of the people for this international church delegation visiting in solidarity the community and parish of Aboud. After drinking coffee and exchange of presentations with the parish community, the delegation visited, together with tens of parishioners, the land where the Israeli were actually building the wall surrounding and isolating the village from the rest of the West Bank, or make life at least very complicated.

Mixed Population

3. Aboud is nestled among terraced olive groves in the West Bank, 18 kilometres northwest of the city of Ramallah, about 450 meters above the sea level, one hour from Jerusalem. The village has about 2,300 residents: 50% Muslims and 50 % Christians, both Catholic and Orthodox. Within the village are seven ancient churches and the oldest dates back to the third century. People here believe that Jesus passed through Aboud on the Roman road from Galilee to Jerusalem. Fr. Firas told us: "The wall that Israel is building through Aboud is not for the security of Israel. It is for the security of Israeli settlements in the area." The Israeli government continues to claim that it is building the wall on Israeli land, but Aboud lies six kilometres inside the Green Line, the pre-1967 border between Israel and the West Bank.

¹ "People of the Holy Land need Bridges not Walls" is a Co-ordinated Awareness Raising Campaign on Israel & Palestine of Pax Christi International which started in May 2004.

² The delegation was composed of Bishop William Kenney (COMECE, Sweden), Mgr. Andreas Laun (Salzburg, Austria), Mgr. Peter Fleetwood (CCEE) and Fr. Paul Lansu.

³ Archbishop Pietro Sambì has been the apostolic nuncio to Israel and Cyprus and the apostolic delegate to Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories. He left the Holy Land to serve as the Papal Nuncio in Washington, DC.

⁴ Father Firas Aridah is a Jordanian priest serving the Roman Catholic Holy Mary Mother of Sorrows Church in the village of Aboud.

Barrier to Protect Two Settlements

4. On 15 April 2005, some delegates of the Israeli Ministry of Defence informed the mayor of the village of Aboud that some 600 hectares (6,000 dönüm.) of land will be expropriated for the construction of the "separation fence," as the Israelis call it, between the West Bank and Israel. The wall will cut off 1,100 acres of Palestinian land for the sake of two illegal Israeli settlements. The first one is called Beit Arye and it was founded in 1980 as a military area and point. Then, it was changed to a big settlement occupying almost 800 dönüm from the lands of Aboud. The second settlement is called Ofarim. It was established in 1982 and occupies almost 700 dönüm of Aboud. Like Beit Arye it was first a military area, and then it was turned into a big settlement, too. The wall and the two settlements will take about 3500 dönüm of the lands of Aboud. It's good to remind that 35% of these lands are cultivated with olive trees and are mostly owned by Christian families.

5. Israel maintains that the barrier is only a temporary structure needed in order to ensure the safety of its citizens from infiltration by Palestinian terrorists. Once peace talks are back on track and the Palestinian National Authority fulfills its promise to curtail terrorist activity in its territory, the wall will be dismantled, Israel says. It also points to a drastic drop in terrorist attacks within Israel since construction of the wall began.

6. Opponents say that in many areas the barrier -- which is actually a series of barbed wire fences, security roads and looming cement slabs -- has been built deep in Palestinian territory and left several villages cut off from other Palestinian territory. If the barrier is completed as planned, it would stretch nearly 400 miles and restrict the movements of 38 percent of residents of the West Bank. Residents say the barrier, which Israel says it is building to protect the country from Palestinian terrorists, will separate them from more than 1,200 acres of their farmland.

7. In regards to the Aboud land, Israel says a gate will be made available allowing residents access to their lands. However, opponents note that such arrangements in other areas leave farmers at the mercy of Israeli patrols who do not always arrive at the gate at the allotted time. They say it also forces them to go through a process of acquiring permits to be allowed through the gate to their land.

Muslims and Christians are Brothers

8. "Sometimes the Israelis give special treatment to the Christians in our village," Fr. Firas said. "Sometimes they give them permits to go through checkpoints while they stop Muslims. They do this to try to separate us but, in reality, we Muslims and Christians are brothers." The church organist Yousef told us: "Some foreigners believe that Islam is the greatest danger for Palestinian Christians rather than Israel's occupation. Israel wants to tell the world that it protects us from the Muslims, but it is not true."

9. In Aboud, Muslims and Christians try to live a normal, peaceful life together. Lately, the village celebrated the Feast of Saint Barbara for the patron saint whose shrine outside Aboud was damaged by the Israeli military in 2002. Muslims were invited to share the traditional feast of Saint Barbara. They also invited the Christians to share their traditional Ramadan evening meal. "We have good relations. Muslims are peaceful people," Yousef said.

Non-Violent Protests

10. With signs, songs and prayers, the village community has been protesting several times against Israel's apartheid wall. Through peaceful demonstrations and the planting

of olive trees, they want to tell the Israelis and the international community that the community is against Israel taking Palestinian lands. "We are working for peace here, but still the Israeli soldiers have attacked our peaceful protests with clubs, sound bombs, tear gas and rubber-coated steel bullets" Fr. Firas stated.

11. In October 2005, Father Firas Aridah wrote H.B. Michel Sabbah, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem⁵, and noted that, since 1980, some 375 acres of village lands already had been confiscated to build two Israeli settlements. On 11 December 2005, Msgr. Michel Sabbah, visited Aboud and planted an olive tree on the planned route of the wall, and told 1,000 peaceful protesters, "The wall doesn't benefit the security of either Israel or anybody else. Our prayers are for the removal of this physical wall currently under construction and the return of our lands. Our hearts are filled with love, and no hatred for anybody. With our faith and love, we demand the removal of this wall. We affirm that it is a mistake and an attack against our lands and our properties, and an attack against friendly relationships between the two people. In your faith and your love you shall find a guide for your political action and your resistance against every oppression. You may say that love is an unknown language to politics, but love is possible in spite of all the evil we experience. We shall make it possible!"

12. Just after Patriarch Sabbah left, an Israeli protesting with the Palestinians was arrested by Israeli soldiers as he planted an olive tree. Fr. Firas underlined that "We have good Israeli friends. We do not say that every Israeli soldier is bad, because they are just soldiers following orders. Yes, there are Palestinian Christians here in Aboud, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Gaza. We are the Salt of the Earth. My religion tells me that I have to love everybody and accept everybody without conditions. We have here good Jewish people, good Muslims and good Christians. We can live together. This is the Holy Land."

Conclusion

13. The surviving of the Palestinian Christian community in the Holy Land is in danger. Many Christian people immigrated, even to Venezuela, as the situation worsened during the last 5 to 6 years as a result of the conflict. Another 35 families left Aboud and went to live in Ramallah. It seems that (more or less) only Ramallah and Bethlehem are able to economically survive. All the young people in Aboud are unemployed. They can neither get married nor build a house. The construction of the barrier will destroy Aboud poor economy, which is mainly based on agriculture, forcing many of the Christian people living in the village to move away, with a further drop in the presence of Christian people in the Holy Land.

Fr. Paul Lansu

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⁵ H.B. Michel Sabbah, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem is also President of Pax Christi International.