

## FIRST LETTER FROM ROSEMARY IN PALESTINE 20.9.2004

I have now been a few days in Nablus. We travelled here from Jerusalem last Friday after 5 days orientation programme which included some sighting, lessons in Arabic (help!), non-violence and of course some update on the current situation. Altogether our group numbers 28 from 8 countries. There are 5 people from UK but most of the group come from Scandinavia. There are 4 from S. Africa who are able to make some sharp comparisons with the apartheid state.

As we travelled here we were very aware that the situation in Nablus is tense. Six people were shot here last Wed. by Israeli troops. Nablus is officially part of the Palestinian Territories but it is surrounded by Israeli lookout posts on the hills surrounding the city, and there are checkpoints on all the main routes in. "It is like being in a large prison camp" are words we have heard several times already. It is particularly hard to get out if you are young and male.

As it was the Muslim holiday, the check point wasn't as busy as usual, but the soldiers took their time and we would not have been allowed through if it hadn't been for the fact that one of those accompanying us knew the phone number of the local commander. Altogether it took just 2 and a half hours to cover the 64k from Jerusalem. There were 6 of us staying that evening so we booked into a hotel. 4 were returning to Jerusalem next day leaving Rune, a young man from Norway, and myself to cope for a week on our own.

We were introduced to a couple of people who will be useful contacts - first a woman who works with mothers whose sons are in prison or who have died in the fighting. She talked very movingly but I'll save her story and details of her work for another time. Then we met the Melkite priest of Nablus - there is a small Christian community here of about 750 but there are 4 denominations! He was an impressive man but obviously very depressed about the situation. We also met Fr. Hussam the Anglican priest who is letting us use an apartment in his compound. It wasn't ready - and still isn't so we are camping in someone else's flat at the moment.

Then we went back to the hotel for a meal and that's when the shooting started - and tear gas we thought judging from the sound. It went on for some time and was very close as the hotel was next to the Old City which is where the Israelis usually attack. We heard that a 19 yr old woman had been shot - she was looking out to see what was happening. Not a good start to our stay!

Since the others departed, Rune and I have been trying to find our way round, getting to know a few people. Learning how and where to shop, and speaking much Arabic Yesterday we went to see the Sisters at the Mother Teresa home for elderly and disabled. The Israeli soldiers had broken into their compound last Wed. and held the Sisters and the elderly priest at gunpoint for several hours. No-one was hurt but the old ladies were very confused and frightened. The sisters are from India and seemed quite resigned to such occurrences.

Most people here are very friendly except those who think we are Israeli! We stand out rather as there are very few visitors now for obvious reasons - a great pity because Nablus is the site of Jacob's Well etc, so pilgrims used to come and lots of tourists would come to see the Old City which is or could be a wonderful place. Currently there are lots of bombed buildings - so plenty of rubble to throw when life gets too frustrating!

So to sum up: beautiful, hot, dusty, friendly, tense.

By the time I next write, I should have more idea of how my time will be best used and we should be properly settled in our apartment.

*Rosemary Read*

*I am currently working as an Ecumenical Accompanier serving on the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel. (EAPPI). The views expressed above are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of EAPPI or WCC. If you would like to publish the information contained here or disseminate it further please first contact the EAPPI Communications Officer [eappi-co@jrol.com](mailto:eappi-co@jrol.com) for permission. Thank you*