

SECOND LETTER FROM ROSEMARY IN PALESTINE - 5th October 2004

A strange fortnight - a mixture of drama and inactivity. On Thursday 23rd Sept we woke to be told soldiers were in the Old City and not to go in there. Outside it seemed OK, so we went to the internet café; but then because it looked as if the whole city would be sealed off for some days we were told to go to Jerusalem.

On 27th we tried to get back to Nablus without success - we were refused entry at the checkpoint, "for our own safety". As we had been asked to visit a village outside Nablus, we went round another way and managed to get there. This involved a rather steep climb up a hillside and avoiding Israeli soldiers, but we eventually got to Asira.

This is a village of 12,000 whose lives are being made a misery by the situation. The village relies on Nablus for jobs, for goods and to sell its produce which is almost exclusively olives and olive oil. All the roads have been blocked and to get to Nablus or anywhere else involves going through checkpoints and a long way round. A journey which used to take 10 -15 mins and cost 2 shekels now takes 2 hours or more, and costs 20 shekels which is 40% of a teacher's salary. This has an awful effect on teachers, students - there is a very good university in Nablus - and anyone going to buy and sell.

One school has been taken over by soldiers, but by working in shifts all children can still attend school in the village. We saw a really good children's playground recently opened which had been part funded by international aid. This was a sign of hope in an otherwise depressing area.

The worst is the army incursions. There is an army post on the top of the hill overlooking Asira (and Nablus in the other direction), and every night jeeps come into the village and drive round annoying the inhabitants and provoking the young men. While we were there (less than 24 hours) this happened 4 times. The worst was from 10.30pm till after midnight - 2 jeeps, letting off sound bombs which are very loud and must have woken every child in the area and certainly all the donkeys. It sounded as if there was some stone throwing and this was followed by live bullets, and tear gas being fired directly into some of the houses. This sort of thing is a nightly occurrence and sometimes people get arrested and some have been shot. We met the brother of a man who was shot in front of his 2 small daughters recently while watering his garden. He was a university teacher and certainly no terrorist.

A quieter time was had in Jericho where we had some human rights training but also were able to enjoy a beautiful resort. Sadly we were the only guests in the hotel as tourism really doesn't exist here now outside Jerusalem.

We are now back in Nablus, all 4 of the team and hope I'll have a lot more to report on within the week.

Rosemary Read

5.10.04