

Two pictures of what we have witnessed in the past week

5/10/04 First Visit to Beit Iba Checkpoint

This was horrifying. People were being treated like cattle but worse – far too many in far too small a space. Student exodus for the weekend obviously swelled the numbers, but the soldiers must know this and there is no excuse for the chaotic way it was dealt with. The maxim watch people were doing a great job stopping the worst of the crush and preventing accidents but that really isn't why they were there I think. And we ended up doing the same most of the time - or just watching.

There seemed no rhyme or reason to the process – some made to empty their bags, some given a cursory glance, some more or less waved through after ID card seen. The attitude of the soldiers varied enormously too – some tried to do an efficient job, some just worked very slowly and seemed sullen about the whole thing, others were down right obstructive officious and obnoxious, sending people back a few feet, pushing them with their guns.

They had no water for those who were detained, no aspirin for those with headaches, and when it got dark no torches to read ID's by or for examining bags.

Some said they had been there over 3 hours, but I think if they queued properly most got through in under an hour. It was the circumstances, the crush, the fear the checkpoint would shut before they had got through, the fact that they have to do this twice a week, some every day that made it so demeaning.

We had a choice - to come away and not go back - and in any case we won't be here in 2 months. They have no choice – if they want to get home or travel out of Nablus they have to go through this process.

Those detained for any length of time were all men, mostly young. It appeared to be a game. Many of them were there for hours, and just had their ID's returned to them when soldiers decided to do it, or so it seemed. All of them were released before the checkpoint closed. Those who showed any spark of cheek were kept longest. Told not to stand up, not to move out from shelter – no wonder some of them were getting angry.

The only good thing was the soldiers did keep the checkpoint open until everyone had gone through.

Decision by team – to be there every Wed and Sat. Not pleasant but worth it we think.

8/10/04 Confrontation

A family of 6 or 7 caged in a house with Israeli soldiers. How many each side we don't know. Reason – it is alleged 1 or 2 of the lads had been throwing stones. Family includes an elderly woman with high blood pressure, a pregnant woman, a small child and 2 or 3 boys and young men.

One of Palestine Medical Relief Society ambulances with 4 volunteers go to the scene to see if family needs medicine and water etc. We accompany them. Volunteers shout to soldiers inside the house saying who we are and why we are there. (He mentions there are "internationals" present.) No answer in spite of repeated attempts. Ambulance draws closer and more calling out takes place. Still no answer. Then jeep arrives, and armoured vehicle approaches but is bit further away. – ambulance told to move. Does so. Jeep pulls up within yards of us and without warning a canister is thrown very close to us. Not tear gas – a sound bomb, which is pretty loud so close to. We start to move away – not fast enough apparently as soldier shouts at us in English "Go away". We are clearly "internationals" as we are wearing our World Council of Churches vests so they are defying us really – and make it clear we are to get a move on.

We walk back to the main road and go into Blata camp a little further on coming round to the other side of the house. Jeep still there and youths gathering near us. More lads arrive with stones - some shots – we remove ourselves and only return when jeep has gone and youths have dispersed. But nothing else to do about the house just now.

This was an unpleasant reminder that Israeli troops behave just how they like even in areas under the Palestinian Authority - and they really don't care about what we say about them to the outside world.

We heard later that the soldiers had left the house. Another example of humiliating and frightening a family for no real purpose.

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