

## FIFTH LETTER FROM ROSEMARY IN PALESTINE - 18/11/04

Writing about the last 2 and half weeks is difficult because some of you have already heard a bit and much of what I have seen has been in the general news. So I will end with something more personal.

Most of you will have heard about the reprisals here in Nablus after the suicide bomber in Tel Aviv on Nov 1<sup>st</sup>. For those who haven't, briefly what happened was this. The bomber, aged 16, came from Askar Camp which is the one we visit quite a lot. So Israeli soldiers came in to the camp and were met by the usual shower of stones. A 14 yr old boy was shot and 2 of his friends one of whom was only 9, were injured. Other undercover soldiers dressed as Palestinian women then moved to another part of Nablus, just behind where we live, and killed 3 men they say were "wanted." Later that evening 2 more houses were destroyed. The city was sealed off. When I went to the checkpoint next morning at 7am not even ambulances were being allowed through, though we heard later that this changed during the day. Most restrictions were lifted after 3 days. That's a very bald account of what was very disturbing for those around us, and heartbreaking for some, but sadly not all that unusual. It was of course a day of similar heartbreak for families in Tel Aviv.

The second big event was of course the death of President Arafat. As his illness became more serious the mood here changed, and by the end almost all were saying how sad they would be if he died. And of course Ramadan was coming to an end so people were not sure how or if they were going to celebrate Eid. Once his death was confirmed, I knew very quickly as it was announced over the loudspeaker from the mosques just a few yards from our apartment and then prayers were chanted so BBC World Service was not really needed!

By noon, the city square was full, and TV cameras, loudspeakers and black flags were in evidence. The various political parties were all there with their banners, although Fatah were obviously the most numerous. The Mayor and other speakers not only described Arafat's life and how he had kept the Palestinian cause before the eyes of the world, but also stressed the need for unity and certainly that was all we saw that day. Most of you will have seen as much as I did of the funeral on Friday – not perhaps conducted in the way we do it in England, but an obvious outpouring of public grief. The next day - the first day of Eid - by 5 am people were going to pay their respects to their own dead, but also to pray and mourn for Yasser Arafat. Of his political party or not, they knew they had lost a renowned leader.

The personal bit? Coming back into Nablus on Monday from a meeting in Jerusalem, I was told no internationals were being allowed in and my passport was taken away. I was then sent to the "pen" which is where men usually aged between about 15 and 35 years of age are kept when the soldiers don't want them to go through the checkpoint. Some of them said they had been there for over 3 hours. Unlike them, I was fortunate in that I could phone the local co-ordinator and DCO and within 20 minutes I was allowed out of the pen, and after another delay was allowed to go on my way.

This was all due to a mistake by one soldier, but it left me feeling how lucky I was not to be a Palestinian male between 15 and 35 years old. This afternoon, I was talking to a young man who comes to our English class, who said he has been unable to visit his uncle for the last 4 years because he is not allowed through the checkpoint. This is particularly poignant at the moment as Eid is the time to visit relations.

I realise I have hardly mentioned the weather in all my accounts. This is because it has been almost the same each day – hot and sunny with hardly a hint of rain. (we're talking t-shirt and sandals weather.) Winter arrived on Tuesday – cold, windy and overcast and then it rained – and how! Although the sun shone a bit yesterday the general pattern has been the same, very cloudy and chilly, though nothing compared to English winters. I do now have a long sleeved shirt over my t-shirt but others in the house were wearing 2 sweaters yesterday evening. I'm glad I've been here for Autumn not winter!

*Rosemary Read*

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*I am currently working in Palestine for the World Council of Churches as part of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). My views are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of my employer. If you would like to use the information contained here in any way, please first contact the EAPPI Communications Officer ([eappi-co@jrol.com](mailto:eappi-co@jrol.com)) for permission. Thank you*