

Occupied Palestine Territories: "Olive Tree Campaign" Gives Purposeful Hope

By Lina Sagral Reyes

JERUSALEM – Barely had the chef at a hostel here prepared the appetizers of *tabbouleh* (chopped herbs with lemon and tomatoes) and *mutabbal* (mashed roasted aubergine with sesame paste) when he got awful news from his village of Biddu, northwest of here.

The builders of the Security Wall had finally reached his village, and the houses of his clan and their olive trees were demolished by bulldozers. Worse, a 21-year-old nephew, who had resisted the soldiers from the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), was hit by gunfire.

Even as tales went around about the much-agitated Chef Mahmood (not his real name) connecting with his kin under siege via mobile phone in between cooking the main dishes of chicken *fatteh* (roasted chicken) and *mjjadera* (brown rice and lentils) for an international delegation of women leaders, the Security Wall and the

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The Apartheid Wall in Qalqilya, where it is highest and thickest. But somehow like the weeds in the foreground, the people's will to resist had been strongest, too.

“Olive Tree Campaign” have been put all of a sudden in sharp focus and given a human face right at the beginning of the “First Palestine Witness Visit Program (FPWVP).”

According to Abla Nasir, secretary-general of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) of Palestine, host of the FPWVP, more than a million trees had been uprooted for the past decades, among them more than 350,000 olive trees. Nasir spoke about the “Olive Tree Campaign” at the FPWVP forum, after the hearty traditional welcome dinner that Mahmood and company had prepared for the Program’s participants.

The FPWVP was a nine-day event held in April this year enabling women leaders from 14 countries to encounter Palestinian communities and interact closely with people in the villages and refugee camps in the West Bank, as far as Qalqilya, Jaiyous and Hableh.

Nasir said that despite the peace process and the recent “Road Map” envisioned by the Quartet (United States, Russia, European Union and the United Nations) to end the occupation of the Palestine territories, the violence and the destruction of homes and farms, particularly of olive trees, had continued relentlessly. The building of the Security Wall along the West Bank and within Jerusalem since June 2002 has already affected several communities, Nasir added.

The Security Wall is called the “Apartheid Wall” by progressive Palestinians and Israelis alike. According to reports released by the IDF, the Wall will span 700 miles or about 550 kilometres, which is about five times the length of the former Berlin Wall that separated capitalist West Germany from then-communist East Germany.

Describing the Security Wall, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) at its website says: “It is made up of a concrete base with a five-metre-high wire-and-mesh superstructure. Rolls of razor wire and a four-metre-deep ditch are placed on one side. In addition, the structure is fitted with electronic sensors and has an earth-covered ‘trace road’ beside it where footprints of anyone crossing can be seen...Parts of the structure consist of an eight-metre-high solid concrete wall, complete with massive watchtowers.”

The building of the Security Wall, at the cost of US\$2 million per kilometre, is the centerpiece of “Operation Defense Shield,” related Jeff Halpern, chair of the Israelis Against Home Demolitions, at another forum that this writer had attended. Halpern quoted Israeli officials as having described the Security Wall as “essential to prevent Palestinian would-be suicide bombers from entering Israel and attacking Israeli civilians, as had happened many times during the Palestinian Second *Intifada* in 2000.”

In response to the felling of olive trees that came in the way of the Security Wall, YWCA, together with the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), had launched the “Olive Tree Campaign.” With its slogan “Keep Hope Alive,” the Campaign hopes to plant 50,000 olive trees in six years and give the world a pro-active example of non-violent resistance to foreign occupation. The people behind the Campaign are in an upbeat mood, even if another problem is brought on by bypass roads also being constructed.

“If olive groves are spared, even the ‘bypass roads’ are strangling the farmers. New defense directives had widened and increased the width of the security defenses around the roads and, at some points, the olive trees are spared but farmers are kept from the groves by the fences,” reports Mira Rizek, YWCA-Palestine president. Heavily secured bypass roads connect the Jewish settlements inside Palestine to Israel. “When you look at it from afar, the bypass road really appears as a literal noose around some olive groves,” she explains.

Rizek further says that even if in some cases the groves are accessible, fear of Israeli sniper fire keeps the farmers away from their fields. Curfews, bans, closures, and checkpoints also contribute to the sense of being caged within the homeland, she adds.

“Olive trees are important to Palestinian culture,” said Nimer Awine, an eco-tourism guide, to the FPWVP participants that he had brought to the foothills of the formerly pine-forested Abu Gheinem, now the Jewish settlement of Har Homa, near the town of Bethlehem. From a vantage point, the participants had a close look at the ongoing destruction. There are now 155 Jewish settlements, like Har Homa, in Palestine, with about 236,000 Jewish settlers. Awine added that it takes

about seven to eight years before a mature olive tree will be able to flower and produce a handful of fruits.

Awine further explained to the FPWVP delegates that the uprooting of the ancient olive trees affects Palestinian agriculture, economy and identity. He said that many products are extracted or made from the olive tree, including olives, olive oil, olive wood, and olive oil-based soap. Olive production contributes to about 38.2 percent of the fruit trees production income, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture.

"Olive trees grow slowly, reaching a height of 20 to 40 feet after about 40 years. They generally live for about 400 years, but many are known to be 700 or 1000 years old," Awine added.

Halpern, Rizek, Nassir and Awine had all noted that the demolitions of houses as well as the uprooting of live trees are contrary to provisions of international laws like the "Fourth Geneva Convention" and the "Oslo Accord" of 1993. Groups have challenged the Security Wall in the Israeli Supreme Court and all the way to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, Netherlands.

Many people have joined campaigns to protect olive farmers from the Israeli soldiers or from settlers by harvesting with them or by escorting them to and from their olive fields. Groups that help the farmers include the International Solidarity Movement, Grassroots International, Protection for Palestinian People, Rabbis for Human Rights, Ta'ayush Arab Jewish Partnership group, Gush Shalom, Ecumenical Accompaniers Program of the World Council of Churches, and World Vision International.

By May 2004, the "Olive Tree Campaign" organisers report that more than 6,000 olive tree saplings were planted for the past two years. From December 2003 until March 2004, the YWCA Campaign planted some 3,940 saplings throughout the West Bank, including in 24 fields in Hebron, Nablus, Beit Jala, Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, Salfit and Dhiesheh Refugee Camp.

According to Rana Qumsiyeh, YWCA advocacy manager, "Donors around the world send about 60 shekels (about US\$20) per tree, the cost of planting

and nurturing one tree, including agronomy lessons for farmers and honoraria for technicians." Schoolchildren in Scandinavian countries and in the USA as well as Palestinians in the *Diaspora* all over the world had sent in donations, she notes.

The Campaign aims to plant 6,000 more olive tree saplings by March 2005, particularly in Gaza where a six-day Israeli siege at Rafah in May 2004 destroyed hundreds of olive groves, aside from having demolished dozens of homes, and having killed at least 42 persons.

Later in April 2004, Mahmood's nephew died from the gunshot wounds. Soon, the YWCA had pledged to help re-plant trees in his honor and memory right there in Biddu.

Before the FPWVP participants tasted the fiery *araq*, the anise-seed drink from Ramallah, and the luscious pastry *kanafeh* that Mahmood had served for the final closing dinner, Rizek spoke about the olive tree as "a universal symbol of peace, an embodiment of our culture, heritage and identity." She noted that although the YWCA has other projects like food production and craft-making for women at several refugee camps, the Olive Tree Campaign, for her, is most symbolic of the Palestinian's tenacity of spirit. "It (The project) makes me more determined not to give up my hopes of a more durable peace," said Rizek.

By asking a question, Rizek further explained what this purposeful hoping seeks to grow and nurture more than Palestine's olive trees: "Have you seen the eyes of those children in the Jalazoun (refugee camp) and the young dancers of Baraem El Fanoun (a cultural dance troupe)?"

And answering the question herself, Rizek said: "When I looked at those kids, I saw the light of hope, I saw the light of their souls. That's why I will not give up, I will never give up. I will always keep up the hope for this children and all the other children still to be born on this land." ↻

Lina Sagara Reyes is a journalist based in Mindanao, Philippines. Her main abiding interest has been in writing non-fiction on gender and development issues. Lina was in the Occupied Palestine Territories to attend the Young Women's Christian Association Conference in Jerusalem when she wrote this article.