

Letter from Palestine

Joyce Carmichael

Joyce Carmichael is a grandmother from Wishaw, and an activist for justice. Joyce was in Palestine/WestBank filming between December 2003 and February 2004. This is an edited account of her reports.

Letter from Palestine —Deir Istia and Qalqilia

Tue 23 Dec 2003

Moved to Qalqilia this morning from Deir Istia, having had a frustrating time by the shut down of Nablus. We were given the most comprehensive handout on the Apartheid Wall and its ramifications and facts—all of them appalling, needless to say.

You can see the Wall from many vantage points. It is undeniably the ugliest, most ruthless and destructive thing I have ever seen. This Wall is an affront to Jews everywhere and that is why we have protest groups like 'Jews for Justice for Palestinians'.

The weather is absolutely freezing—like January in Scotland. My friends Grassan and Fatheya are very upset because their son is in the Naqab, the prison in the Negev. He is naked 24/7, the food is inedible, the 1,600 prisoners are under canvas and the conditions are barbaric. They got news from the Red Cross that he is to have no visitors for the whole of the two and a half years.

Abdul and Amnie also received news this week. Mohammed, 17 years old, has been told that he is unlikely to receive less than two years. He is in Magido in Israel. Conditions at Magido have improved since my last visit. Mohammed says he gets enough to eat and his parents can visit him once a month. They go by Armoured Personnel Carrier after being stripped and searched and can take a child under five with them.

Letter from Palestine —Qalqilia and Tulkaram

Wed 31 Dec 2003

We went to Qalqilia then to Tulkaram and then back to Qalqilia for the big demo on the 27th Dec. The demonstration was large but had few internationals. The Israel Defence Force (IDF) did not mess about. We got tear gassed but the wind quickly blew it away. First time I have heard the noise the tear gas 'gun' makes. A siftish whump sound. I will not forget it.

We took a couple of days to assimilate what we saw in Qalqilia before we could really speak about it. It is such a vast and intolerable cruelty that one's mind rejects it as ridiculous. But it is as bad as it looks. Not a house we were in was free of UNRWA food parcels; this in a fertile and water-rich environment. 65% of the population are unemployed with the theft of land. The town only

has one gate. Produce is stopped from leaving by the IDF until it has rotted and is useless. No replacement goods are allowed in. People cannot access their land and 25% of the water from the aquifer beneath Qalqilia is being drawn off by the Israelis everyday. They have drilled down since encircling the land with the Wall and have made at least five wells according to the town officials. The PR man at the Baladia (town hall) says "It is like a zoo; the Qalqilians are prisoners in their town but the zoo keeper feels no moral necessity to feed them." This is a very apt way of putting it. It is a living hell. The businesses are all failing. 400 families have left; 2,000 people. Some have gone abroad, some to other parts of the West Bank. Suicide has increased enormously as has fundamentalism. Qalqilia had been quite secular until now.

Tulkaram is also a disaster area. I never saw so many beggars in my life. Every few yards a hand is outstretched for Shekels, the person in rags and looking so ill. This in a fertile town with plenty of water. The situation in both towns is much more desperate than I understood when in Scotland. I cannot exaggerate what is going on here. We are in a state of agitation over the immediate need for the world to understand the magnitude of the starvation. I insisted on putting 'Jews for Justice for Palestinians' on our banner as I feel it is such a strong statement. The members of that group must get themselves out here to see what we have seen. I am sensitive to their good intentions re. the purchase and planting of olive trees but it will not make a damn bit of difference. They must film then show this to their community and the UK government. I am sure they would have more clout than the rest of us. The Baladia, the cafe owners and almost everybody would not take money for the purchases we made. It was really very difficult. "Pay us by telling your people. Tell the world", they said.

The malnutrition in the children is much more visible this year in Deir Istia—I see it every few children including Raisi's. There just is not enough protein. The same food is eaten every day and it is just not varied enough. Some hours I despair. What's the point. Me and my silly stall and boycott Marks & Spencers leaflets in Glasgow. This machine is relentless. Sharon wants the land, the water, and nothing is going to stop him. Then my mood changes. This machine may indeed move on to the bitter end but I WILL WITNESS and I WILL FILM AND RECORD. It will not be a secret if I and other activists can help it.

Letter from Palestine —Israeli lies and violence

Sat 3 Jan 2004

Got excited last night watching CNN and BBC. The report re. troops withdrawing wholesale from Jenin is absolutely not true. It is mere propaganda. Not only are tanks still outside Jenin but inside as well. Nothing has changed. This is known from phoning people in various parts of Jenin. The curfew is as before. Someone should phone the BBC and tell them the truth.

Staying with my Canadian friends here in Jenin. Many times they have colleagues to stay for the night because they cannot get home because gates in the wall are not manned and are firmly closed. This works in both directions—sometimes folk cannot get to work. The Merryland Hotel here is full and this is why. The men have a short journey home and it would certainly be cheaper than staying in the hotel. The stress, however, of being locked in or out is just not worth the money saved and most stay for the week going home at week-



John Chuckman *The Segregation Fence: Built by the Sharon government on Palestinian lands for the benefit of Israeli settlers, 2003.*

ends. Sometimes this is not possible either.

The [Israeli] papers are full of the shot activists issue [when soldiers used live rounds on demonstrators peacefully protesting against the Apartheid Wall]. The soldier who did the shooting complains that he did not know one of the activists was Israeli, or he would not have shot. Many Israelis have spoken up and are appalled at this attitude. The other, a US activist, is referred to as a 'tourist'—but he is with the International Solidarity Movement.

Letter from Palestine —Nablus

Wed 14 Jan 2004

I arrived in Nablus this morning after much trouble—the IDF do not want international eyes seeing what they are doing, this is the problem. I argued with the soldiers, lied, and with persistence this worked. I will be in Nablus for a week before moving to Jenin and then Tulkaram which has had the most hideous time over the last few days.

Letter from Palestine —Nablus

Mon 19 Jan 2004

Received many emails from people wondering about the appalling explosion I reported that killed 27 family members in Old City, Nablus last April 2003. As I had Salwa who is Palestinian with me I had no language problems, communication was free flowing. The young couple and their mother reported the details as follows: During the night a large number of soldiers came. There was no loud hailer demand for someone to exit either house. There was just the sound of many soldiers and their vehicles. No demand was made for any one to come out of either house. As all the occupants of the two houses are dead no one knows what the Israelis said to the inhabitants. They can only surmise that people were ordered upstairs and obeyed this order. The quietness of the soldiers was extraordinary as usually when they are hunting for someone there is maximum racket and intimidation. Two huge explosions followed. These must have been caused with a great amount of explosives as the buildings are substantial to say the least. The walls are two or three feet thick—even the internal walls are thick. When the soldiers left it could be seen that two, three story houses had been completely demolished, folded in on themselves. The rescue attempts started immediately despite the danger of the soldiers returning. If they had come back while the neighbours



were frantically clearing the debris more deaths would have followed. The explosion, of course, damaged the houses of neighbours. The man we spoke to invited us in. His adjoining wall was open to the elements and no chance of being repaired due to no funds. I got the feeling they slept across the way at his mother's with his three toddlers. His mother is now agoraphobic and has panic attacks if she tries to leave her house. This gracious, kindly woman was a privilege to talk to, kindness personified. She was anxious about my face-full of mosquito bites—in the face of such misery her humanity is intact. Her other daughter who lives with her had to go to hospital the next day after the explosion as she has a pace maker and the blast disrupted it. That could have been another death caused by the IDF that would never have made news.

The details of locating and burying the dead are harrowing. It took weeks. As each body was located it was buried quickly and with respect. One little boy aged seven was found minus his scalp and hair. He was buried, as was his mother, father, grandparents, three year old brother and baby brother. Later in the excavations his hair and scalp were found on another floor—the blast had caught his head first and the force had dealt with this part of him first before depositing him further up in the debris. His grave was respectfully opened and this part of him buried with the rest.

Earlier this morning Salwa located a courtyard and showed me where 19 bodies had to be temporarily buried from another Israeli incursion as the city was seething with soldiers and the cemeteries inaccessible. The dead had to be buried in this courtyard during the night by stealth by terrified family members and friends fearful of the soldiers returning. After the Israelis left the dead were disinterred and buried at the cemetery.

In Nablus there are many pictures of a young man who carried the coffin at his young cousin's funeral. This young man was not active, not political in any way. He was shot in the middle of the forehead and killed by a sniper. This is what can happen if you are 'guilty' of assisting at a funeral of a freedom fighter.



Letter from Palestine—Nablus

Thur 22 Jan 2004

The Israelis are back in Nablus today. They have surrounded the Samaritan area and are calling for a household to come out into the street because they want to blow it up. The family so far is refusing—very worrying as these soldiers have no respect whatever for life.

Salwa's son cannot go to school because the school is in the area where the soldiers are. Salwa and her husband are home today as this is their week-end, Thursday and Friday. I was planning to go to the Baladia to get info regarding NGOs but that is shelved at the moment. I stick out like a sore thumb with my fair skin and short white hair. The Israelis have been repeating the warning to Internationals to get out of the West Bank and reminding us that we are not welcome. Apparently last week this started with radio announcements commanding all internationals to sign the form we all know about, where we sign saying if we are shot it is our own fault for entering a war zone. Wajdi's father was angered by the sheer mendacity of this form—this was the first many Palestinians heard about it. I will have to keep my

head down there is no doubt about that. I will shelve Jenin which was the plan for tomorrow. Who knows how long the soldiers will be here?

Letter from Palestine—Nablus

Fri 23 Jan 2004

The information about the murder of Aboud and Ibrahim by dogs and bullets is now complete. The neighbours had assumed, reasonably enough, that the man called Ibrahim was staying at the family home of Aboud. Why else would the soldiers attack the home and kill the son along with Ibrahim? The facts are that the soldiers were chasing this man Ibrahim (married, father of four and wanted) for a period before he entered the street that the murders took place in. There is a public footpath by the house's garden wall which is entered from the street. Although next to the house it is clearly not part of the house property. This made no difference to the IDF. The dogs got Ibrahim at the back of the house and for good measure the soldiers blasted the house with many shots for a long time. I like to think that the soldiers mistakenly thought the man was trying to enter the house by a back garden gate. The shooting at the house destroyed ten windows steel frames and all. The soldiers then entered the house and shot the fridge, the washing machine, the three toilets, a twin tub, every fitted wardrobe in the house and much else. They shot into a bedroom which was Aboud's and his two brothers'. The three were tied at the wrist and the two younger taken to an Armoured Personnel Carrier. Aboud was taken to the back of the house near flats and was heard by the people in the flats to be shouting "I don't know him! I don't know him!" over and over again. A brave woman in the flats was watching from a darkened room. She says the soldiers told him to shut up, but he kept repeating the words. The soldiers insisted he did know him and when his protests failed to stop they shot him by forcing a gun in his mouth and shot him with a dum-dum bullet. End of Amoud's young life. They then shot him in the chest with the same type of bullet. I have the autopsy report.

The details about the resistance fighter are correct as stated in earlier letters. After the dogs were taken off he was placed on his back with his arms and legs spread and then he was shot six times in each arm and many dum-dum bullets sent into the genital area. Bits of bone and hair are still being collected.

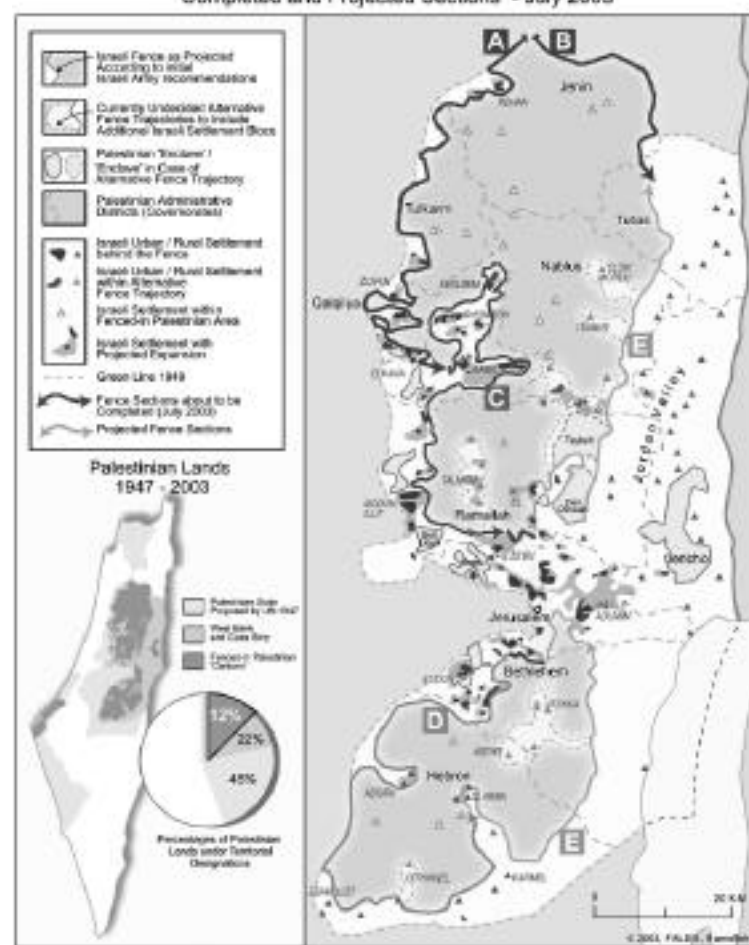
The father and mother of Aboud have twice welcomed me into their home. It is totally trashed. Curtains have been ripped down and slashed, a beautiful rose wood table stabbed right through. Glass is everywhere and no room habitable. The water tanks were shot on the roof which meant the water poured into their home and flooded everywhere. The bullet holes have all been plastered—there must be at least forty. Not a door is left unharmed and most have to be replaced including the main front door which is metal. This couple were so touched that someone was interested enough to take film of the mess and ask about their son. Apart from the post mortem at the local government mortuary there has been no official interest in this appalling event. I asked if they had made a complaint to anyone, they said "To whom should we complain? The Israelis? Arafat? There is nobody to complain to."

Letter from Palestine—Nablus

Sun 25 Jan 2004: Operation Earthquake

As Thursday developed we got updates from Radio Nablus. The IDF had entered the town at 5.30 am having secreted soldiers earlier. They entered the town from different directions, one or two jeeps at a time and then an APC or two and finally the tanks. They then converged on the Samaritan area en masse. Two four storey blocks of flats were evacuated and the men crowded into one small workshop and the women and children in another. They had to stay there all day with nothing to eat or drink and no toileting opportuni-

Israel's Separation Fence: Completed and Projected Sections - July 2003



ties. The mother of a suspected resistance fighter was made to get in a jeep and speak through a loud hailer asking him to give himself up or the two blocks would be demolished by explosives. This continued throughout the morning. Some people refused to leave the flats and offered resistance—stone throwing. This invasion was recognised as the threatened Operation Earthquake and people realised they were going to lose their homes, their belongings and everything they hold dear in this illegal collective punishment. Finally, a Molotov Cocktail was thrown from a high window and landed on one of the tanks. Then tank gun-fire could be heard. We had heard sporadic shooting in the morning -tuh-tuh-tuh of repeating weapons. I can't describe the noise of tank gun-fire—it is a hellish sound. We heard on the radio about the earlier gun-fire. The announcer remarked that there was no resistance and asked why the soldiers could possibly be shooting? I found out later, they had billeted themselves in neighbouring houses and were shooting the photos of elderly deceased parents, wedding china, ceilings, etc. and also set off stun bombs which caused further damage. By mid afternoon, neighbouring houses were evacuated and the people imprisoned in shops across from the flats—hell on earth. At 5.10 pm a monstrous explosion was heard—just one. Both flats were blown to smithereens. Nablus is built on two mountains and on a narrow valley. The blast from the flats passed over the top of the building opposite which were further down the mountain side causing damage to buildings 700m away. Salwa and I went in the evening so that I could film. There were many people, all very stunned and quiet. The sight of the blast will be engraved on my memory for ever.

Earlier I had filmed bulldozers going past and returning again. They were used to clear cars and a wall in the area of the flats so that the soldiers could access the sight better to set their explosives. The cars—some very new smart ones because this area is inhabited by the better off in Nablus—were first wrecked by the tanks and then



bulldozed into the ditch in front of the flats.

As I stood on the road filming, these four storey solid buildings were now beneath the level of my feet. People were not yet searching for belongings as the Red Crescent were there telling us through loud hailers to stay off until the morning when the site could be surveyed.

We returned the following morning. The blast damage to houses over a vast area has rendered many of them unstable and some will have to be knocked down, some renovated. Most of the householders are middle-aged owners who have worked hard, despite the situation, to make good provision for their families. Now they are at square one. These flats cost £78,000 sterling and, like most of us in Britain, the equity in one's house is what you have to show for a lifetime's endeavour. Wiped out in one blast. We were invited into a small grocers shop to see the damage and then into the house above the shop, owned by the same man. The place had been one of the billets for the IDF and had been trashed even before the blast. The ceilings were spattered with gunfire, china, mattresses plus bedding shot through and burned by the bullets. Then came the blast. These people, like all Palestinians, have no one to turn to. No complaint will be made to Israel or the UN as both turn a



deaf ear. The local Baladia provides a massive machine which has a probe to turn over the debris and help people find what they can before lifting the rubble into skips and removing it to leave a chasm where the flats once stood. I saw cars being removed which had been in basement garages. The blast had lifted these cars to the top of the heap. My description of this site is quite inadequate to describe what we were seeing. I asked if the Palestine Authority will send observers or letters of sympathy and people laughed at my innocence.

Letter from Palestine—Jenin

Wed 28 Jan 2004

Left Nablus yesterday. Took three hours to reach Jenin but delighted to have succeeded in getting in. The check-point between Nablus and Jenin at Beit Ibah is the most hostile I have encountered. The soldiers are in a reinforced metal container and speak through a small hole in the front. There is an Xray machine which one walks through. There were two tanks and various vehicles. Having successfully passed through this, buses and cars are again stopped by soldiers a quarter of a mile down the road—we were made to get off the bus and stand in the rain. You are 'interviewed' again. A mile further on, the same thing happens yet again. "Do you see our life?" has been said to me so often. This time we stayed on the bus and the IDF came strolling through it, then we carried on to Jenin on a road that was so chewed up by tanks and bulldozers that it was almost impossible to drive. Got to Jenin and went straight to the Baladia where I was adopted—that really is the only way I can put it. Jenin is wrecked. It is an old county town with rich farming land in abundance. The Naqba in 1948 pro-

duced the refugee camp which holds 5,000 people. The population of town and camp is about 35,000.

Letter from Palestine—Jenin

Sat 31 Jan 2004

I have been here ten days and have not got used to how damaged this lovely country town is. I am very worried about people whose houses I am staying in—reprisals are frequent and collaborators endemic according to the police. It is difficult to describe the kindness people have shown.

I have a lot of film to bring home—the destruction is incredible. The Mukatta [PA HQ] was bombed so they built another. It was bombed so the Palestinian Authority is now scattered across this large town in temporary buildings. I visited the Police Headquarters under cover of night and spoke with the Head of Police. He doubles as a major. This slight man has great presence and an aura of extreme sadness and sweetness about him. I could see he was much respected by his men, indeed loved. After the massacre in April 2002 when the town repelled the Israelis for four days he was imprisoned for months. On his release he was not allowed to go to Amman, Jordan to see his wife and children. This ban has now been lifted but not until one was in place in Jordan. Now he can't visit because the Jordanians won't allow it. This man looked to be in his fifties but I suspect he is a bit younger. I asked where he stayed and he told me he now lives in the station as he would be a threat to any landlord who rented him property—the place would be demolished.

Samer, my policeman friend, took me to Burkin yesterday to see the ancient Christian Church that marks Jesus' healing of the ten lepers in the cave. This is the fourth oldest Christian church in the world. The two men who let us in are Muslim and they told me that this ancient town contains Christians and Muslims in equal amounts. All attend each others' festivals, funerals, christenings and weddings. No problem has been recorded at the Mosque or the Church in the hundreds of years that records have been kept. I was allowed to film inside this still functioning ancient building. I was asked about my own religion and confessed my atheism. This was received with interest and consideration. No one felt insulted.

The 200 men taken away by the IDF three weeks ago have not been heard of since. This is seriously worrying. 400 men were taken away in the Battle of Jenin and never returned. All taken, dead, in lorries to be buried in communal graves by the IDF. The refugee camp was happy two days ago when several of their men were returned from prison in Lebanon by the Israelis. The suicide bomber's explosion in Jerusalem that followed the 13 killed in Gaza the day before has not seemed to have affected the prisoner exchange. Many of those killed in Gaza were children and this is causing much grief here in Jenin. I like Jenin very much because it feels the pain of other towns. This is not the case all over the West Bank. This letter has been the most difficult that I have sent from the West Bank. Jenin is so battered it is painful to look at. I am also having to be most careful in what I am saying. I find it difficult to write like this. I was supposed to leave Jenin during the week but that got postponed because of the bomber. "No internationals", is still the order so no point in approaching checkpoints until this blows over. I may go back to Nablus by the mountains. I don't think I could face Beit Ibah checkpoint again.

Letter from Palestine—

Tue 3 Feb 2004

Said good-bye to poor, battered, obstinate Jenin yesterday. Sad to leave everybody. You don't know if they will be in prison, dead, injured or homeless due to demolition, or annexed.

The checkpoint at Beit Ibah was very easy for me. The soldiers seemed to have been infected with the festive mood of families returning after the Eidh children's festival. Not one person was



waiting at the side anxiously wondering if they would get their identity card back and the queues moved quite briskly.

Still turning over in my mind the dreadful situation in Jenin. Reading this morning that many international politicians are not sure if the Wall is legal or not. How can the Wall be legal when it is being built on land that is illegally occupied? How can it be legal when it is breaching the Geneva Convention which states no occupied land can be annexed?

I won't be reunited with my map of the Wall until I get back to Deir Istia. I must study it to see the predicted course around Jenin. Jenin is mostly flat with hundreds of dunums of arable land around it. They too call the Israeli's plan 'Imprison and Starve.' I don't use the word cantons, now. I use the real word—reservation. The Palestinians are going to be encircled by the Wall, penned in reservations and largely left to fend for themselves which, with most water and arable land gone, will mean a very, very lean life. To move out of one reservation to another will mean applying in writing to secure a pass. Showing an identity card as happens now will be abandoned. The situation will be more like the palaver a Palestinian has to go through to go to Jordan—apply many weeks before for a travel permit. These, of course, are mostly refused. I spoke for a good while to a Jenin GP. He has not left Jenin for four years. He just refuses to play Israeli games, do the 'checkpoint dance' as he calls it.

Nablus is quiet just now, no soldiers. I go back to Salfit district Thursday to look at the progress of the Wall. The surveyor's pegs are going to split the town in half; the olive groves and arable land will be annexed between the green line and the Wall, many, many dunuums. This is not going to be an emergency in the future—it is an emergency now.

Before I left Jenin, the police told me that news of the 200 plus prisoners taken in the last Israeli attack has started to trickle in. For those of you who are not familiar with the procedure, let me explain. The Israelis can arrest you from your own bed in your own home. No court order would come, no news of which prison you are held in; absolutely no information at all would be forthcoming. What the families do is contact the Red Cross which has an office solely set up to confirm arrests and find out where the prisoners are held. In other words, the Red Cross has to spend money doing the Israeli's job. Remember, next time you are putting money in a Red Cross collecting tin that you are helping the Red Cross locate Palestinian prisoners. Your taxes are financing the State of Israel and our arms trade has grown wealthy selling to this regime. The Israeli army uniforms are made in Britain. It is hard to think what more we can do to support this regime.

Joyce

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Palestinian children standing against Israel's apartheid wall built around the Palestinian town Qalqiliya. AEF, 2002

