



LIVE FROM *Palestine*

TESTIMONIES
FROM THE
NONVIOLENT
RESISTANCE

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT NORTHERN CALIFORNIA SUPPORT GROUP

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Bethlehem Encircled

By Henry Norr, November 17, 2007

"IT IS UNCONSCIONABLE THAT BETHLEHEM SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO DIE SLOWLY FROM STRANGULATION."

—Archbishop Desmond Tutu, 2005

Bethlehem at Christmas time – by now it's an old chestnut for Middle East reporters. Every December, you can find feature stories about the city of Jesus' birth in mainstream media outlets across the Western world – publications that have, in most cases, reported nothing about the place since the previous holiday season.

The formula is predictable: in recent years there's typically something about Christmas decorations paid for by the Hamas-dominated municipal administration; the obligatory quote from a Manger Square souvenir seller or restaurant owner about the decline of tourism since the second *intifada* began; some statistics about Christian Palestinians abandoning the city; perhaps a brief reference to the 25-foot-high Israeli Wall that looms over the northern edge of town. Reporters with a taste for irony may mention some of the signs that decorate the Wall: the huge, multicolored "Peace Be With You," in English, Hebrew, and Arabic, that the Israeli government has put up on its side, or the defiant graffiti—"Warsaw Ghetto 1943," "Apartheid," and "To exist is to resist," for example—that crowd the Palestinian side.

Even the best of the mainstream reportage, however, generally misses the fundamental dynamics that underlie Bethlehem's current travails: *the city, symbol of faith and hope to millions, is falling victim to a process of systematic strangulation.* The Wall has already cut it off from Jerusalem, a city with which it has been bound economically, culturally, and spiritually for more than two millennia.

Now, as construction of the Wall—and several sub-walls—extends to the west and south of the city, Bethlehem is also being blocked from the rural villages that have traditionally supplied most of its food. Beyond the walls, a new generation of illegal Israeli settlements will cement the division of the West Bank into



small, encircled fragments that recall the bantustans of apartheid South Africa—or, closer to home, the reservations to which the United States confined its indigenous population.

While political leaders on all sides are again babbling on about the never-ending "peace process" and a renewed "freeze on settlement activity," the reality on the ground is that the agony of Bethlehem, far from slowing down, is advancing at an accelerating pace.

RACHEL'S TOMB

Visually, the city's problems are most apparent at its north end, closest to Jerusalem. There, construction of the Wall is virtually complete, and what was just a large but ramshackle checkpoint when I first passed

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through it in 2002 has been transformed into a huge and Orwellian “terminal,” where travelers lucky enough to have the right passport or permit shuffle through an array of high-tech inspection stations, directed by the amplified voices of unseen guards.

Just south of the terminal, Israeli forces last year completed an extension of the main wall—this one even more imposing, with cement segments 30 and 36 feet high, four watch towers, and an enormous iron gate—that encloses Rachel’s Tomb, supposed burial site of the Old Testament matriarch, where Muslims as well as Jews once prayed; effectively, the site has been annexed to Jewish Jerusalem, even though it’s on the Palestinian side of the main Wall. Ultra-Orthodox Jews have already set up a new mini-settlement and yeshiva within the compound.

The once-thriving commercial district in this neighborhood has been reduced to a virtual wasteland. According to a United Nations report issued in December 2004, 72 of the 80 small businesses in the area, including all 11 restaurants, 20 of 22 vehicle maintenance shops, and 12 of 13 factories or workshops, had shut down or moved since 2002. (Most of the shops still open in 2004 have undoubtedly closed since then.)

Elsewhere in the city, the economic picture is almost as dire. For generations, tourists and pilgrims have been Bethlehem’s primary source of income. In the 1990s, when peace seemed to be on the way, local entrepreneurs and foreign investors poured millions of dollars into construction of new hotels, restaurants, and other facilities. Now most of them, if not shut down altogether, are grossly underutilized. From a high of 90,000 visitors a month in early 2000, tourism in the city has dropped to an estimated average of 1,500 a month this year. Tens of thousands used to descend on the city for Christmas; last December the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism reported a total of 3,500. And while most of the visitors used to stay in Bethlehem, spending their money in its hotels, restaurants, and souvenir shops, the majority now come only on day trips, traveling in huge Israeli tour buses that whisk them back to the Israeli side of the Wall before nightfall.

The net effect: unemployment among Bethlehem’s 45,000 residents (including some 15,000 in the city’s three refugee camps) has soared

to 60 to 65 percent, according to the Mayor, Dr. Victor Batarseh. (A U.S. citizen who used to practice thoracic surgery in Sacramento, CA, the 73-year-old Batarseh has long been aligned with the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine; he won the mayor’s seat in 2005, when he ran in alliance with Hamas and Islamic Jihad against the corruption of the previous Fatah-dominated municipal administration.) And with unemployment, of course, come poverty and despair, which in turn have produced new problems of crime and drugs.

MORE WALLS, MORE SETTLEMENTS

The problems described above are by now apparent to any open-minded visitor to Bethlehem. What’s not so obvious—and hardly ever reported in the Western press—is that Israel in recent years has embarked on a stepped-up campaign to ring the city with more walls, new and expanded settlements, and a Jewish-only “by-pass road”—all built on confiscated Palestinian land.

- Northeast of the city, for example, Israel is rapidly expanding the settlement of Har Homa, the concrete monstrosity that occupies the once pine-covered hill Palestinians called Jabal Abu Ghneim, and planning two new adjacent settlements; all together, the built-up area in the complex is slated to grow by 350 percent. One consequence: Israel recently issued military orders for the demolition of parts of an affordable-housing development built by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate on a nearby hill east of Beit Sahour.

- Northwest of Bethlehem, near the existing settlements of Gilo and Har Gilo, a new settlement called Giv’at Yael is slated to house 55,000 Jews on Palestinian agricultural lands. The project is part of a plan to establish an unbroken arc of settlements from the Gush Etzion bloc to the west and south of Bethlehem all the way to Jerusalem.

- In the same area, a new wall now under construction will completely surround and isolate the Palestinian village of al-Walaja; the only way out will be through a single Israeli-controlled crossing point.

- West and southwest of Bethlehem, another segment of the Wall will surround a huge chunk of the Bethlehem Governorate (district). This project is intended to encompass Kfar Etzion, the oldest Israeli settlement, and the 11 other settlements that make up the Gush Etzion bloc, with a total population of 80,000 settlers. But eight Palestinian villages, representing almost a third of the district’s currently accessible agricultural land, will

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also fall within the Etzion walls, leaving 20,000 residents completely cut off and probably unable to deliver their produce to Bethlehem's markets. (More than three quarters of the governorate's total agricultural land, lying to the east of Bethlehem city, has been inaccessible to Palestinians since Israel declared it a "closed military area" shortly after conquering it in the 1967 war.)

- Southwest of Bethlehem, near the border of the Hebron district, the Israelis have begun construction of the Wall plus a major new terminal on land confiscated from the Palestinian village of Umm Salamuna. It's believed to be part of a long-term plan to build a new "ring road" around Bethlehem's southeastern flanks, thus completing the encirclement of the city.

RISING RESISTANCE

As has been true elsewhere in the West Bank in recent years, the villagers of the Bethlehem Governorate are mounting a determined campaign of nonviolent resistance to the new Israeli offensive. Inspired by the example of Bil'in, the village northeast of Jeru-

salem that staged weekly marches to protest the theft of its lands, attracted wide publicity within Israel and around the world, and eventually prevailed on the Israeli High Court to order adjustments to the route of the Wall, residents of al-Walajah, Artas, Umm Salamuna, and other villages around Bethlehem have in recent months adopted similar tactics.

As in Bil'in, Israeli and international activists, including the ISM, have joined the demonstrations and helped the villagers get word of their struggle out to the world. Also as in Bil'in, the Israeli Occupation Forces have responded with the usual tools of their trade: tear gas, stun grenades, and rubber bullets.

The villagers, of course, are well aware that they can't by themselves stop the Wall or oust the settlers; that will require major changes in the international political climate, in particular in U.S. policy. But as usual they are standing fast, waiting for the world to take note and take action to stop the injustices Israel continues to perpetrate. ■

Henry Norr has visited Bethlehem four times since 2002. In 2005 he spent two months there, volunteering with the International Middle East Media Center.

Israeli Forces Turn Palestinian Apricot Grove into a Septic Tank

by Jonas Moffat, May 2007

The beautiful and historic village of Artas lies just outside Jesus' hometown of Bethlehem. Israel is building the Apartheid Wall through Artas to expand one colony, Efrat, and build two new settlements, Tamar and Dagan. This expansion is illegal under international law and the so-called "Road Map to Peace." The residents of Efrat are now piping out their sewage through land that the Abu Swai family has been cultivating apricots on for generations.

In mid-May, Abu Swai's family received the IOF's evacuation notice, and a call for activist support went out. "This is the night," Abu Swai told me. "This is the night our trees will die."

Twenty or so international activists heeded the call, and by 11:30PM on May 20th, we had assembled at the orchard, joining 50 local Palestinians. Tents had been set up at the orchard two nights before, and campfires were boiling water for tea and coffee. People were eating pita bread and telling stories. On the surface, they seemed to be having a good time, but if

you looked deep into the eyes of Abu Swai and others, you could see the truth. There was a nauseated, impatient, waiting feeling to the whole scene. Around 2:30AM, we saw a pack of Israeli soldiers walking the perimeter of the village.

The campers continued to drink tea and chat. We were hearing the rustling apricot leaves for the last time.

The soldiers then entered the village. It was too dark to go ahead with their operation, so what did they want? "We are here to inform you that there is a Jewish sniper somewhere in the hills around here. We are here to protect." Basically, they wanted us all to go home. But they knew we wouldn't. This was home to some of us. They were also gathering informa-



Israeli activist dragged away and arrested by Israeli Occupation Forces

Photo Credit: Jonas Moffat

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Solidarity Voyage to Gaza

by Paul Larudee, November 2007

On 25 October, a Palestinian patient died at Erez crossing while awaiting being allowed to cross to Israeli hospital. A week ago, a woman died in Gaza hospital with her newly born baby, while awaiting permit to be transferred to Israel for medical treatment.

So begins the latest report of the Palestinian-International Campaign to End the Siege on Gaza. It goes on to tell of operating rooms closed due to lack of anesthesia, the prohibition against any goods leaving Gaza and all but 12 basic commodities from entering, and Israeli preparations to cut electricity, fuel and financial services. Painful but ironic comparisons can be increasingly drawn with Nazi Germany's measures against Warsaw's Jewish ghetto in World War II, and for much the same reason: because Palestinians constitute an unwanted ethnic group.

As reported in the last issue, Palestinians, Israelis and internationals—Jews, Muslims, Christians and Buddhists—are determined to resist the siege and collective punishment of 1.5 million Palestinians, more than half of them children. Our plan is to defy the Israeli blockade of Gaza and enter by sea in order to establish open passage for Gaza's besieged population. We intend to test Israel's claim that Gaza is no longer occupied, and since we will not pass through Israeli territory, we will not seek Israeli permission.

Several developments have taken place since the last issue of the newsletter. First, our voyage had to be postponed to May/June 2008, in order to allow more time for fundraising and to avoid the unpredictable winter seas. Second, we now have a total of five official invitations—four from Palestinian NGOs in Gaza and one from the Minister of Youth and Sport of the Hamas-run government. These assure that we are welcome not only by civil society, but also by the functional Palestinian power in Gaza. (ISM and the Free Gaza Movement do not support any

political parties.)

The third development is that the Free Gaza Movement now has 501(c)(3) status and can receive tax-exempt donations in its own name. As described elsewhere in this issue, ISM-Northern California also gained such status in a joint procedure as two projects of the same nonprofit. This will hopefully open the door to improved fundraising.

The final development is the creation of the Palestinian-International Campaign to End the Siege on Gaza described at the beginning of this report. The Campaign was conceived by Dr. Eyad El-Sarraj of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme as a six-month effort to break the siege of Gaza, beginning with an international symposium in Gaza in November 2007 and culminating with the voyages of the Free Gaza Movement in May/June 2008. The aim of this nonviolent campaign is to put international pressure on the Israeli government to abide by humanitarian law. For more information, go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Al-Awda-News/message/25422>.

What can you do to help? Here are some suggestions:

1. **Get organizational endorsements.** If you know a group that ought to be supporting this effort, help get them on board (not just figuratively, in this case).
2. **Invite speakers** to your home or group, anywhere in the U.S. or in some places overseas as well. We have a compelling audiovisual presentation.
3. **Recruit passengers.** Everyone is welcome, but we especially want high profile figures who will attract attention.
4. **Donate time and/or money.** We need volunteers with or without special skills, and of course the funds to make this effort possible. As of the time of writing, we have raised over \$50,000. However, we will need to raise at least twice that, and preferably more.

For more information, go to www.freegaza.org or call 510-236-5338.

Paul Larudee first went to Palestine in 1965 and began volunteering with the ISM in March 2002.

Speakers Available

ISM volunteers who have recently returned from Palestine are available to make presentations to high school and college campuses, churches, organizations and house parties.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

The Northern California ISM Support Group needs volunteers to help with local organizing activities. For more information, call 510-236-4250 or email info@norcalism.org

Did you Donate Last Time?

If so, we want to express our special thanks. We covered our printing and mailing costs and more, and have committed to sending you two newsletters per year for the indefinite future. However, our costs go far beyond the newsletter, so we hope that if you may be able to help again — especially if you were unable to do so last time.

How important is our work? There are lots of worthy appeals to help the victims of Israel's violations of human rights. However, for every victim that is helped another is created. Human rights work is never as well funded as victim relief, and yet our work is to prevent the creation of victims who then need your relief dollars.

We are currently sponsoring two Bay Area volunteers participating long-term in Palestinian nonviolent resistance with ISM in the West Bank, as well as supporting ISM-Palestine with funding and international communications equipment and services. We also participate in national and local activities to educate the American public and support other Palestine solidarity groups.

Please use the donation envelope on page 4/5 to give as generously as you can. Thank you.

Apricot Grove

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tion: How many Palestinians are here? How many Israelis and internationals? How many soldiers and police would they need?

Nobody slept. The tents were empty. At 5:00am, just as the skies were getting bluer, a Palestinian boy came running into the village. "Jeish! Jeish!" The army is coming. Thirty soldiers arrived in six jeeps. They held a paper in Hebrew and showed it to everyone. Then they spoke to Abu Swai and the group in Hebrew—the language of the Occupation. The commanding officer said that in five minutes, if we didn't voluntarily leave, we would be forcibly removed.

An hour later, most of us had been arrested, and the bulldozers were at work destroying the magnificent old trees— all just to provide a place for the settlers to dump their sewage.

What kind of "democracy" uproots trees and destroys livelihoods to privilege one group of people over another?

Jonas Moffatt is from the Bay Area and now resides in Cairo as a long-term volunteer with both ISM and the Tel Rumeida Circus for Detained Palestinians.

Independence Won!

We wish it were for Palestine, but we're talking about nonprofit status for the Northern California ISM Support Group. Until now we have relied upon the fiscal sponsorship of our treasured allies, the Middle East Children's Alliance and Tri-City Peace and Justice. On September 25, 2007, however, the Internal Revenue Service granted us separate 501(c)(3) status.

This means that your donations to ISM-Northern California are now tax deductible without having to be written to a third party fiscal sponsor. It has other potential benefits, as well, such as reducing our mailing costs. However, the biggest gain may be intangible: the credibility that the IRS blessing confers upon us. It certifies our activities and provides a measure of accountability, thus enhancing our ability to attract grants.

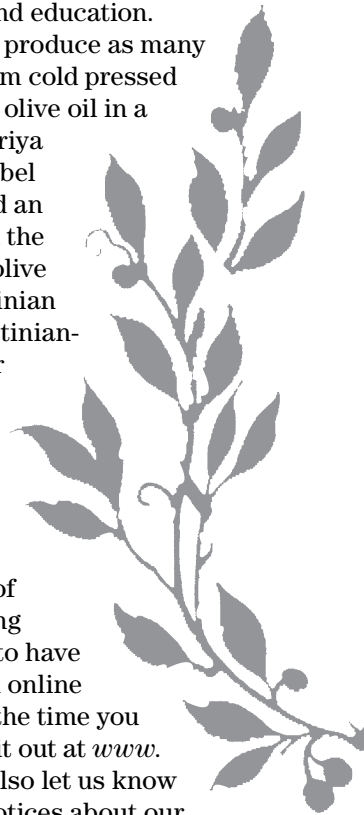
Thanks for sticking with us until this achievement.

Palestinian Olive Oil

Delivered to your Door?

Our olive oil bottling parties are famous in the San Francisco Bay Area and are typical of our efforts to combine fundraising, outreach and education. They are lots of fun and produce as many as 750 bottles of premium cold pressed extra virgin Palestinian olive oil in a single day, with the Hurriya ("freedom" in Arabic) label on a Palestinian flag and an educational message on the back. We also package olive oil soap made by Palestinian farmers, and offer Palestinian-made kuffiyas and other items.

We've had lots of requests to ship, but have been hesitant to do so without the proper packaging and a setup that takes care of the payment and shipping requirements. We hope to have that in place through an online store at our website by the time you read this. Please check it out at www.norcalism.org. Please also let us know if you want to receive notices about our bottlings via email.



Palestinian Kids Move to the Back of the Bus

by Katie Miranda, August 24, 2007

This summer, the International Solidarity Movement, Art Under Apartheid and the Tel Rumeida Project teamed up to take over 100 Palestinian children from Hebron to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the beach in Jaffa.

This was no easy task.

West Bank Palestinian residents over the age of 16 are not allowed into Israel, but those under 16 *are* allowed. In fact, there is no legal

Now I will prove to you how the apartheid wall is completely useless for keeping suicide bombers out of Israel.

way to prevent them from entering because they do not have ID cards yet. But most of these kids will never get to visit Jerusalem or go to the sea because their parents are not allowed to take them.

Having checked with Israel's Association for Civil Rights, we knew it was permitted



At the Dome of the Rock complex, a brother and sister share a happy moment. Their T-shirts display the camp theme, "Solidarity and Friendship."

Photo Credit: Baheja

to take these kids through the checkpoints into Israel, but we decided to check in with the District Coordination Office (DCO) of the Israeli military just to let them know that we would be doing this and we didn't want any problems. They told us we needed a permit (this is not true). We asked for a permit and were refused. So of course we decided to do it anyway.

We bought food and water for the 45 kids in the first group, arranged for their lunch at a restaurant in Jerusalem, got copies of their birth certificates (proof of their age and proof

they are allowed to be in Israel), and reserved a bus. We met the kids at 7am in downtown Hebron.

We knew that if soldiers at any of the checkpoints knew there were West Bank Palestinian kids on the bus, they would stop us and very likely refuse us entry. Earlier in the summer, two busloads of our kids had been forced to wait in the hot sun without water for two hours while the army came up with phony delays. Not wanting a repeat of *that* nightmare, we chose to use Israeli checkpoint racism to our advantage.

In my experience, if soldiers at a checkpoint see white or Jewish-looking people in the front seat, they will not stop the car to check IDs. This has happened to me countless times. In contrast, people who look Palestinian are automatically stopped, although they may be dark-skinned Jews.

Settler cars zoom through checkpoints with no delays; Palestinians are always stopped and searched.

Now I will prove to you how the apartheid wall is completely useless for keeping suicide bombers out of Israel.

We stuck four white people in the front seat of that bus and drove through the checkpoint without a second glance from the soldiers. All the kids cheered.

See how easy it is to sneak Palestinians into Israel?

The kids were elated to go to the mosque and to play in the water. Most of them had never seen the sea before.

I didn't see any of them playing with Israeli kids at the beach, but it was good for them to at least be around Israeli kids who weren't hostile or violent towards them. The Palestinian adults who ran the Tel Rumeida summer camp made a point of explaining to the kids the difference between Israelis living in Hebron and Israelis living in Tel Aviv. Fortunately, many Israeli activists came to volunteer in Tel Rumeida, so the kids had already begun learning the difference.

For a longer version of this article, see <http://moomin13.livejournal.com/77388.html>

Katie Miranda is an ISM-Bay Area volunteer who has been living and working in Palestine for the past year.

Hebron: Encounters with the Occupiers

by T. Evans, August, 2007

While visiting the H1 area of Hebron in July 2007, I took part in a nonviolent “action”—that is, an intentional assertion of human rights and dignity where these are actively repressed.

Twenty international human-rights workers and several Palestinian journalists accompanied the children of a very large family out to the fields next to their home. Most adult family members stayed home to avoid the illegal harassment and arrest experienced in the past. The lone adult who did come along was a man of great strength and courage, who, because of his disability, lives in a crippled, child-sized body.

This family’s small parcel of land lies between two settlement blocks that close upon it like a vise. Evidently, the Israelis plan to squeeze out all of the Palestinian homes that lie between the two settlements: settlers have constructed a broad, concrete, stair-stepped pathway across the family’s land to connect them, and armed settlers constantly guard the land. Even more obscenely, the settlers have erected a tent there and deemed it a “synagogue;” it is “holy” and thus given even more protection. For years, the family has not had access to this land upon which they formerly grazed their goats and grew figs and grapes. Family members have been shot at, beaten and imprisoned for daring to set foot upon their own land.

On this afternoon, our action was to hand-till the chunk of field right next to the raggedy synagogue tent. We filled scores of bags with thorny, dried grasses. We didn’t work alone, though! As we cleared the field, more and more Israeli vehicles lined the road alongside the field. Soldiers brandishing rifles surrounded the “synagogue,” and military police questioned the one adult family member. I loved the way this man, crippled in body but huge in spirit, stood steadfastly, placing himself as a barrier between the military and all of his children and us, his back to them, defiant.

Probably because there were so many internationals, we weren’t particularly hassled beyond this absurd show of force. With sufficient international presence, the family could continue preparing the field for agricultural use—but the way things often go, the settlers will likely succeed in the end.

At dusk, as some of us walked back to Tel Rumeida, more adventure ensued. We were walking into an oncoming swarm of scores of

settlers heading back to their settlement after attending services. Tangibly hostile energy erupted into slurs and insults, followed by spit and stones. After the worst was over, we came upon Israeli soldiers and told them about the attack. In response, they detained the young Palestinian man with us, taking his ID, searching his belongings and questioning him as we gathered around and protested their inappropriate actions.

Meanwhile, under cover of darkness, another soldier grabbed our 15-year-old Palestinian companion, threw him up against a wall and began punching him in the stomach, grinding him into the wall and kicking his legs out from under him. When we saw, we all started yelling; the soldier frisked the boy briefly and let him go. Earlier I’d wondered why this boy was chain-smoking already—not that smoking actually relieves the stress of being a designated punching bag.

After our Palestinian friends had departed, two young soldiers at a checkpoint demanded our passports. To inspect our passports, one kid stuck the barrel of his M-16 directly into our chests so as to use the little flashlight attached to it. Done to us internationals, it was a freaky prank rather than a serious threat; the power dynamic of such a stunt is vastly different when done to Palestinians. An 18-year-old soldier holds total power over the Occupied. If that power is challenged, he can beat them, arrest them or kill them with impunity.

For the record, it’s hard to have a gun stuck in your chest—one young woman broke down in tears after the event. We internationals have far less ability to endure abuse than the Palestinians. They have sixty years’ practice maintaining a certain dignity while facing repeated pain and humiliation; we sputter and boil much more quickly. We have to remember that if we cause a ruckus, it won’t be taken out on us but on our friends instead; so in solidarity and against some of our natures, we button our lips.

This is T. Evans’s second trip to Palestine. For lots more stories and photos, see www.deepglitter.com



The settler ‘synagogue’ used as a pretext to confiscate a Palestinian family’s field.

Photo: T. Evans

For the record, it’s hard to have a gun stuck in your chest.

Volunteers Needed for autumn 2008 Olive Harvest

by Asa Winstanley

The Olive Harvest is an annual affirmation of Palestinians' historical, spiritual and economic connection to their land, and a rejection of Israeli efforts to seize it. As the indigenous people of this land, Palestinians have farmed olives here for thousands of years. The annual harvest is a symbol of life for Palestinian communities. Sadly, agricultural productivity over the last seven years has decreased dramatically because of closures and sieges that prohibit access to farms and markets. Over half a million olive and fruit trees have been destroyed since September 2000. Palestinian agriculture is being destroyed by the policies of the Israeli government, and the rights of Palestinians to their land and to a livelihood are being denied.

International and Israeli volunteers join Palestinians each year to harvest olives, despite efforts by Israeli settlers and soldiers with bulldozers to destroy this vital centerpiece of Palestinian life.

The 2008 Olive Harvest Campaign is part

of the ongoing work of the International Solidarity Movement, a Palestinian-led movement of Palestinian, Israeli and international activists working to raise awareness about the struggle for Palestinian freedom. ISM uses nonviolent, direct-action methods of resistance to confront and challenge Israeli persecution of Palestinians. With your participation, we will expose the injustice of the Israeli Occupation and send a message to the world that the Occupation must end and the wall must fall!

Please come to Palestine and join ISM for the 2008 Olive Harvest Campaign. ■



For more information or to register: www.palsolidarity.org

NORCAL ISM Support Group

405 Vista Heights Rd.
El Cerrito, CA 94530

www.norcalism.org
info@norcalism.org
510 - 236 - 4250



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