
Narrative Report

Solidarity Visit to Palestine-Israel & Amman Conference on Justice for Palestine

OVERVIEW

Peace for Life (PfL) as a multi-religious, intercultural movement for peace and justice that commits itself to building people's solidarity and faith-based resistance against empire and state terrorism recognises the centrality of the Palestinian question—of the entire Middle East issue in general—to its agenda. The complexity that lie at the very core of the problems that plague Palestine are the very same fundamental issues that define Peace for Life—empire, state terrorism, the perversion of religion for power and hegemony. Thus despite the possible perils of getting entangled in the intricacies of Palestinian politics or the likelihood of courting disagreements within PfL itself, given the contentions and strong emotions engendered by Palestinian matters on everyone, PfL considered its immediate involvement in the Palestinian struggle as essential if it is to realise its set objectives, especially so given the worsening conditions in the area.

With Israel being increasingly perceived—and indeed functioning—as an apartheid regime, it is also becoming clearer that occupation also means the purposive deprivation of the most fundamental human rights of people of an entire nation by another, of actions that weaken the social fabric of the occupied. Thus, the liberation of Palestine is inextricably linked with the struggle of peoples worldwide for a more dignified existence, for equality, and against global capitalism, the very system from whence the occupation stands.

Furthermore, the religious dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict brings to fore the necessity of forging solidarity among faith communities in a common struggle against all forces of injustice and exploitation, one of the most essential of PfL's objectives.

Organisational context

The unique urgency of the Palestinian challenge has made the PfL to aspire that its second assembly, the 2008 *People's Forum on Peace for Life (PFPL)*, situate its core issues—religion, empire, and resistance—from the context of the Palestine-Israeli conflict, informed by local struggles and seen from the perspective of interfaith solidarity. The decision was made during the PfL expanded Working Group Meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, held in January 2007 in time for the World Social Forum.

On further exploration, however, the PfL Mid-East Sub Group (created primarily to act as the steering committee of the activity) decided that Palestine would not be a feasible host to a full-scale PfL Forum, and neither would Amman. Management and logistical problems, not to mention the prohibitive cost, were deemed too formidable especially so given the limited lead time.

The final decision was to postpone the holding of the scheduled Pfl People's Forum (scheduled biennially) and undertake a more modest Palestinian programme for 2007 as an initial effort for a continuing study and reflection geared towards a long-term participation in the Palestinian struggle for justice, dignity, and peace. The ***PfL Interfaith Peace Pilgrimage and Solidarity Visit to Palestine-Israel*** became both an initial step and a commitment for engagement. As such, it was decided that this particular programme would form the basis of the thematic and contextual framework of Pfl's *Second People's Forum*.

Themes and objectives

The programme in Palestine takes off from previous Pfl activities that centre on the faith communities' distinct role in the resistance against empire and the struggle for justice and peace. The theme, ***"Breaking the Yoke of Empire and Occupation: People of Faith with Palestine in Struggle"*** underscores the position of Pfl with regards to the Palestinian issue, and is the overall theme adapted for both the mission and the strategy conference titled the **International Conference on Justice for Palestine** held in Amman after the mission.

The one-day Public Forum held in Beit Jala on the 9th of November had the sub theme, ***"Palestine, Empire and Occupation: Taking the Faith Communities to the Front Lines"*** focused more on the political and geo-strategic analysis of as well as the local action being undertaken on the subject as pursued by Palestinians themselves.

For both the mission and the conference, Pfl tried to remain faithful to the objectives set down upon inception of the project. These are as follows:

General objectives

- To express solidarity with the Palestinian people and contribute to increased south-south and faith-based solidarity and response to the Palestinian struggle for liberation
- To gain a deeper understanding of the broader geopolitical context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and draw lessons and inspiration from the people's struggles
- To draw out ways of integrating women's issues in the Middle East as principal component of the overall advocacy for peace and the liberation of Palestine

Particular objectives

- Document and analyse the occupation of Palestine and the oppression of the Palestinian people and relate it to the broader Middle East conflict;
- Reflect on the potential of popular movements, faith-based communities and South-South partnerships and platforms in creating real impact and contributing to real and just change for the people of Palestine and the Middle East as whole;
- Gain insight from the particularity of the experiences of the women in Palestine on how best to address in conflict situations unifying issues of ethnicities and religions (practices) while focusing on the imperatives of liberating women from bondage and oppression justified in terms of ethic and religious identities
- Explore practical ways of undertaking solidarity initiatives with the people of Palestine and the Middle East; and contribute to the task of drawing up an action agenda for South-South solidarity that will integrate Pfl efforts with WCC and other ecumenical initiatives;
- Give an interreligious testimony to justice and peace in Palestine and Israel as well as help Pfl deepen and sharpen its methodology of interfaith work based on interfaith solidarity that engages both religious intellectuals and activists working on the ground;

- Begin a theological process, within the ecumenical community, of reframing an approach to the question of Middle East peace that goes beyond a criticism of Christian Zionism and gives sharper focus on the dimension of justice and human rights;
- Probe the “peace process” discourse in the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the dominant role that the United States plays, and its relevance to other situations of conflict;
- Deliberate on the role of the Middle East question in the overall programme of Peace for Life and explore ways by which an organisational foundation can be developed for PFL’s advocacy and education campaigns.

Program Components

The programme was divided into two main parts: a) 7-day solidarity mission and exposure trips to the Occupied Territories of Palestine scheduled 4th – 10th November, which included a one-day public forum, and b) two-and-a-half day strategy conference—International Conference on Justice for Palestine—held on the 10th – 12th November.

Additionally a one-day caucus was held for members of the Continuation Committee and some North American mission participants. The meeting was earlier envisioned as a Continuation Committee meeting preparatory to the holding of the *PfL People’s Forum*. However, there were not enough CC members present to constitute a quorum.

The caucus made an assessment of the recently concluded conference and prepared the timetable for the implementation of the major activities agreed upon in the conference, among them the planning for the 2008 PFL People’s Forum.

The mission commenced in Amman, Jordan, with the delegation travelling by land to the West Bank through Allenby Bridge for 7-day programme in occupied Palestine, a valuable exposure in itself, if only to experience, albeit to a lesser degree, the harassment Palestinians are subjected to every time they cross the border.

The programme in Palestine was prepared in partnership with a cooperating group based in the area.

Participants

There were a total of 67 persons who participated in both the solidarity mission and the conference in Amman. This figure includes the Palestinians who participated in the conference both as delegates or speakers. For the solidarity mission, there were a total of 29 participants coming from Asia (10, including Asia Pacific); North America (13); Latin America and the Caribbean (2); Europe (3 including an Israeli now living in Europe); and Africa (1). The mission members were predominantly Christians from various denominations (20). Others were Muslims (4), Jews (2) and Hindus (3).

Joining the PFL mission were the members of the exposure team composed of ecumenical and church workers belonging to the United Church of Canada, organised by Desmond Jagger-Parsons who at the time mission was UCC’s person in-charge of the Middle East programme.

The two-and-a-half day conference held in Amman had a total of 49 delegates, 13 of whom were members of the PFL Continuation Committee. There were 18 local participants (i.e., from Palestine-Israel and Jordan) and additional four from the Middle East region, mainly from Lebanon. The rest were international participants from North America, Europe, Africa, Latin America & the Caribbean, and Asia & Pacific.

The conference could really be regarded as a truly interfaith gathering because despite the predominance of Christians (30), the representation of other faiths, of Muslims in particular, took a very active participation that made their points of view to be well articulated in all discussions.

The public forum held in Beit Jala drew in a total of some 80 people mostly from Palestine. Attendance of Palestinians from other areas within the occupied territories proved difficult due to Israeli-imposed movement restrictions and checkpoints that made keeping to schedules uncertain or nearly impossible.

Entry into Palestine, which necessitated passing through Israeli authorities, was problematic for a number of participants who were banned from entry by virtue of nationality (Lebanese and Malaysians) or active involvement in the Palestinian cause. Entry also turned out vexing (even traumatic) for some simply because they were of a profile (age group and religion, mainly) that made the Israeli authorities suspicious. At least one young Muslim from the Philippines, Mohammad Abdulaziz, a member of the mission was denied entry, harassed, and detained for three days by the Israeli authorities. The organisers were given no information by the Israeli immigration/intelligence personnel of his detention; he was simply missing.

PfL provided travel subsidies for Palestinians attending the conference in Jordan and some selected participants from the global South. Also, members of the PfL Continuation Committee coming from non-industrial North were provided full or partial subsidies. All other participants in both mission and conference paid for their own travels.

Hosting and Preparatory Work

A PfL Subgroup on Middle East drawn in from members of the PfL Continuation Committee was formed in the Working Group Nairobi meeting in January to help the Secretariat in the planning of the Palestine programme. Members of this sub group were selected mainly on the basis of their familiarity with the area; they also acted as the steering committee of the conference (Chris Ferguson, David Wildman, Gabriel Habib, and Carmencita Karagdag (*ex-officio*). Other members of the subgroup, Farid Esack and Lilia Solano, were unable to participate in the mission; Eilert Rostrup, a co-opted member made it to the last leg of the mission and the conference in Amman. A planning meeting of the subgroup members based in the US was held in March and August 2007.

A 300-page primer on Palestine was prepared for PfL by Ranjan Solomon; it was sent by email in five instalments to all mission members and other interested parties within a month before departure. Bound copies were distributed during the conference for the participants' ready reference.

PfL's organising and hosting partner in Palestine was a committee formed by persons affiliated with groups comprised under the National Coalition of Christian Organisations in Palestine (NCCOP), a formation made up of some 40 organisations or centres. Among them are the Inter Church Centre, Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre, Network of Christian Organisation in Bethlehem, East Jerusalem YMCA and YWCA of Palestine, and the Alternative Tourism Group (ATG).

The local organising committee took charge of all the arrangements and scheduled the meetings within Palestine in consultation with the Manila secretariat. The local group was also responsible for inviting participants in the public forum.

The Alternative Tourism Group (ATG) based in Palestine made all the bookings for transportation and accommodations.

PALESTINE PEACE AND SOLIDARITY MISSION

Day 1 (November 4) Jerusalem

The week-long programme in Palestine started for most of the mission participants with the land trip from Amman via the Allenby Bridge in morning of the 4th November. All 18 of us, except for two (David Wildman and Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta) were entering Occupied Palestine for the first time. David would be the group leader being the most experienced in crossing the border with a group. He gave a briefing (with the necessary warnings) on how much patience we had to be prepared with and how to deal with the border personnel: we were entering as tourists. We were fortunate that there weren't that many crossing the border that day, and except for the thorough screening for metallic things, we were allowed to pass and get into our waiting bus without much problem.

At the border, we made our first observation of how much control Israel imposes on Palestinians and the indignities the latter are subjected to. It was apparent that our easier-than-expected entry was far from the standard ordeal Palestinians experience when crossing the border, if ever they were allowed at all, as evidenced by the number of people waiting for their turns to be long called and the way luggage and packages (not ours) were subjected to close scrutiny, their contents inspected one-by-one and embarrassingly displayed.

On the road to Jerusalem, David, who doubled as the tourist guide, pointed to the Israeli settlements built in Palestine territories and the well-paved Israeli-only roads that connect the settlements. It was easy to distinguish the more recently built Israeli housing from the less fancy and "unplanned" look of Palestinian villages. The native Bedouin population could also be seen from a distance in their shabby makeshift tents, a far cry from what Hollywood movies pictured their tents to be.

Arrival in Jerusalem was past midday, and by the time we got to check in at the Imperial Hotel in the Old City, it was way past lunch time. Here we hooked up with the other members of the mission (those who did not go via Amman) and started the urgent task of looking for a place to have lunch.

Evening was reserved for a cultural program (organised as a fundraising activity by a group of Palestinian organisations) featuring Palestinian songs/music and poetry performed by locally well-known artists. Sadly, though, all were in Arabic that despite the expressiveness of the performers, the PFL group had to fight off sleep if only to express our solidarity (what with jet lags, and the long road trip through the dessert to aggravate drowsiness). The last number, a dance about the Wall performed by young girls, was well appreciated since no language was needed for the whole thing to be understood.

Bishop Aldo Etchegoyen from Argentina read a message of solidarity from Nobel Peace Laureate Adolfo Perez Esquivel, which he sent through the Bishop upon knowing of his visit to Palestine.

It was a balmy Mediterranean weather and pleasant breeze that accompanied us in our walk back to the hotel, providing a window of what Jerusalem experience could be without the despondency that occupation brings.

Day 2 (November 5) Jerusalem

After a briefing from Yusef Daher of the Jerusalem Inter-Church Center, the delegation took off for the long day's schedule.

1. Archbishop Fouad Twal

First stop was the curia of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem for an audience with the Coadjutor Archbishop Fouad Twal. The Archbishop focused on the occupation of Palestine. He emphasized that as a land sacred to all the Abrahamic faiths, it cannot but belong to all: "We are condemned to live together in the Holy Land." He took the Christians to task in that they should form the bridge between the Muslims and the Jews, and in restoring the holiness of the Holy Land. His message to the group was to pray for the security of all. "Security," he said, "comes from justice, never from walls, separations and divisions." His short informal talk was followed by comments and questions from the mission members. The call on the archbishop ended with a photo session.

2. Mustafa Abu Sway – Al Quds University

The next appointment was at the Al Quds University where the delegation had a session with Dr Abu Sway, professor of philosophy and Islamic studies. He, too, discussed the discrimination experienced by the Palestinians in every aspect of daily life under Israeli occupation. He also pointed out that of the taxes collected in the occupied territories; only 12 per cent were returned to Palestine. It was, however, his position on the dangers of secularism that proved controversial to some of the members of the mission. He contends that "world heritage is deeply rooted in the spiritual realm" and religion has a great role in providing solution to the "problematic of otherness;" he considers the phenomenon of the so-called fundamentalism as nothing more than a response to modernity's effect on the erosion of cultural identities. He views Islam as a continuation of past revelations; thus, it is not in opposition to Judaism and Christianity. As for the Oslo Agreement, he noted that despite its many drawbacks, one positive result was that it enabled the Palestinians to write their own textbooks. A lively discussion on Islamic fundamentalism, modernity, and secularism ensued.

3. YWCA

The delegation received a briefing on the situation of Palestine along with the advocacy work being undertaken by YWCA through its various offices or jointly with other groups, as in the case of the "Free Palestine Campaign" and the "Olive Tree Campaign". The participants particularly appreciated the video presentation on the realities faced by the Palestinians under occupation, complete with quantitative and statistical information complemented by personal explanation and narratives. Additional information on the education and training programmes undertaken by YWCA was also presented. The delegation members felt that the video presentation would be very useful for their own advocacies on the Palestine issue.

4. Sabeel's Contemporary Way of the Cross

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre accorded the mission members with the "Contemporary Way of the Cross, a liturgical journey along the Palestinian Via Dolorosa" led by Nora Carmi, Sabeel's coordinator of its Women's Programme. The ritual takes parallel events in Christ's Passion with the Palestinian's suffering. As in the traditional rite, the Contemporary Way of the Cross takes Gospel readings for each station, with the various stations designated from within the entire Occupied Palestine. The stations are named as follows: First Station: The Nakba of 1948; Second: Refugees; Third: 1967 Invasion and Occupation; Fourth: Siege and Curfew; Fifth: Stress and Humiliation; Sixth: Settlements and Settlers; Seventh: Home Demolitions; Eighth: Women against the Occupation; Ninth: Checkpoints; Tenth: Bureaucratic Oppression; Eleventh: Devastation of Gaza; Twelfth: The Wall; Thirteenth: The Loss of Jerusalem; and the Fourteenth asks, "What will the fourteenth station be?"

Due to limited time, we could only perform the First and Seventh Stations. The first was celebrated in a park on Mt. Scopus with a compelling view of Jerusalem, a scene of some of the worst atrocities committed against the native Palestinian population during the

1948 invasion. We skipped to the Seventh, with a visit to a would-be victim of house demolition. It was a well-built house in Beit Hanina threatened by demolition presumably due to some technical or bureaucratic violation.

5. Combatants for Peace

Next stop was the small office of the group Combatants for Peace, an organisation made up of some 300 activists who once served in either the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) or FATAH. We talked with Bassam Aramin, one of the founders and former Fatah fighter and Itamar Shafira who served in the IDF. They described the organisation's objective as bringing together former combatants from both sides who have decided not to continue using violence as an approach to solving the conflict. They are committed to dialogue as a means of ending the occupation and the conflict. Bassam Aramin's story about how his 10-year old daughter was killed when Israeli border police in the West Bank town of Anata fired at the stone-throwing youths was particularly moving.

6. Israel Committee against Home Demolitions (ICAHD) – Jeff Halper

The Israeli Committee against Home Demolitions is headed by its coordinator, Jeff Halper, a US-born anthropologist who migrated to Israel in 1973. He gave a brief of the various campaigns of their group—against home demolitions, against occupation, against Apartheid, against human rights violations. He raised the urgency of the problem of home demolitions: 18,000 Palestinian homes demolished since 1967. He mentioned that Beit Hainan may be getting more attention because the victims of demolitions were rich people; “it is worse in other less known places.” He also discussed the Israeli policy of taking in cheaper foreign workers (some 30,000 at present) instead of Palestinians meant not only to deprive them of earnings but also as part of the overall effort to so to exclude all Palestinians from Israeli society.

7. Encounter with Local Leaders (Dinner)

The delegation was back in the hotel at about 8:00 in the evening for dinner and more interaction with some Palestinian leaders: Rev. Naim Ateek of Sabeel, George Sahar of CARE International, Jonathan Kuttab, Bernard Sorella and a few others. Despite the seriousness of the subject matter, the session was conversational and light hearted. There were obvious differences in the politics of the Palestinian representatives and their preferred approach to the issue of occupation and conflict resolution.

Day 3 (November 6) Jerusalem and Ramallah

1. Defence of Children International – Palestine Section

The delegation was given an extensive and detailed presentation of the situation of children in Palestine, their victimisation, which included making them “legitimate targets” and suffering long years in prison. The presentation had statistics and case histories and anecdotes. For example, about 900 Palestinian children have been killed since the second Intifada in 2000; furthermore, arrests of children happen on a regular basis, usually forcibly inside their houses.

A question and answer session followed. At the end of the session, the members of the mission were given materials and reports prepared by DCI.

2. ADDAMEER - Prisoners' Support and Human Rights Association

Sahar Francis, a Palestinian lawyer who works with ADDAMEER in Ramallah gave a very troubling report on the circumstances of arrests and the treatment of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, particularly so in the systematic use of torture. She also discussed the judicial system and military courts that handle the cases. The presentation was followed by an open forum where the mission asked clarifications and made parallel observations of their own experiences with political detention in other countries.

3. Shrine of Yaser Arafat

The long presentations on the human rights situation in Occupied Palestine were followed by a visit to the mausoleum of Yaser Arafat, a fairly large but rather stark memorial for the long-time chairman of the PLO. There weren't many visitors when we came, owing, perhaps, to the very intense midday sun that made even picture taking nearly impossible for ordinary cameras.

4. Jerusalem - Tour of the Old City

After hefty lunch of enumerable salads and roasted chicken (which we were told was a typical Palestinian food) we were brought back to the Old City of Jerusalem to experience the holy sites: *Via Dolorosa* (believed by Christians to be the route that Jesus took between his condemnation by Pilate and his crucifixion and burial), which ended in the *Church of the Holy Sepulchre*. The path starts from St. Stephen's gate and goes through the Christian and the Muslim Quarters of the Old City. The path itself is still very much used today with many of the markers made by pilgrims in early times mixed up with contemporary signage and structures. Our limited time allowed us to make a quick walkabout and a few stops that did not necessarily correspond to the Stations. Our guide brought us to the small alleys of the Muslim Quarter with its age-old stone buildings. Jewish settlers are now encroaching into the area.

We reached the Church of the Holy Sepulchre after going through winding-after-winding alleys. We were given a short history of the church itself by the guide, after which we were left to explore and pay homage to the Christian relics by ourselves. The church and its environs were filled with tourists/pilgrims that there was no time for us to queue to get inside the most sacred places.

5. Beit Sahour - Dinner and Overnight Stay with Families (2 nights)

Towards evening we were back to Beit Sahour at the office of the Alternative Tourism Group (ATG) for a briefing on the next day's activity and to meet with our hosts for the next two days.

The stay with families was designed for visitors to experience the ordinary life of people and to have a more intimate interaction with Palestinians in their own homes, and for Palestinians to meet with persons and groups who are in solidarity with them. Home stay with local indigenous Christians is one of the innovative offerings of ATG meant to promote better understanding, and for local households to share in the benefits of tourism.

The mission members were to spend two nights in "home stay" taking two dinners and breakfasts with the host families.

We were assigned two each to participating families of the ATG programme. The experiences, as with the accommodations, vary among us. Some (as in the case of Eunice Santana and me) were lodged in especially built room for guests separate from the main house (with a marker outside indicating the source of funding for the construction). While others stayed in spare bedrooms inside the houses.

Our hosts, devout members of the Greek Orthodox Church, have hosted enumerable guests from all over the world. They were saddened by the fact that so many families have left Bethlehem and Beit Sahour to live abroad because of the difficulties brought to the Palestinian residents by Israeli policies. They pointed to a number of nice houses now vacant.

Day 4 (November 7) Hebron and Bethlehem

1. Ibrahimi Mosque, Es Souq and the Streets of Hebron with the Christian Peacemakers Teams (CPT) and the WCC Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI)

The exposure started with a walk along the streets of Hebron, site of much violence against the resident Palestinians. Signs of harassment and abuse of local Palestinian population were all over the place, apparent effort on the part of Israeli settlers to make life in Hebron impossible for Palestinians: broken windows, padlocked shops, barricades. It is clearly a place where ethnic cleansing is at work.

We were met by members of CPT and the WCC-EAPPI, volunteers from Europe. We walked along the streets with them, receiving information about what they do and providing explanation why certain places (e.g., barricades) were what they were. We saw how Palestinian children needed to be accompanied by volunteers like them just to cross the street to their school if only to prevent them from being attacked. We also went inside the Ibrahimi Mosque, site of what Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe to be the tombs of four biblical couples: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah. The place, which came under the control of Israel after the 1967 war, was closely guarded by Israeli guards. The mosque was the scene of the massacre in 1994 of 29 Palestinians in prayer by a Jewish fanatic.

The “tour” was followed by a briefing from the Ecumenical Accompaniers, done in a small park in front of the mosque under the watchful eyes of Israeli guards (who made their presence obvious) patrolling the area.

2. IBDA Cultural Center and the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee

Ibdaa describes itself as a grassroots initiative of Dheisheh Refugee Camp that aims to “provide a safe environment for the camp's children, youth, and women to develop a range of skills, creatively express themselves, and build leadership through cultural, educational, and social activities that are not readily available in either the camp or occupied Palestine.” Part of its work is rehabilitating infrastructure and providing social services to the population.

We were welcomed inside the centre where murals made by some young people from the refugee camp were on display. The discussion was informal and relaxed.

At the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee, we were able to watch a film showing of the efforts being made by the committee in preserving the artistic history and architectural integrity of Hebron in the midst of destruction being brought about by the occupation.

3. The Palestinian Centre for Rapprochement between People (PCR) and the International Middle East Media Centre (IMEMC)

George Rishmawi, executive director of the PCR gave the briefing. It was started 19 years ago after the First Intifada doing advocacy but had now moved to advocacy and direct action.

Among its major activity is inviting internationals to come to Palestine to join the Palestinians in peaceful resistance against the occupation and its policies. Through the many avenues within the international solidarity movement, internationals are engaged in working with locals to raise awareness around the world on the Palestinian cause. Other activities include youth training on advocacy skills, and information through media. It works closely with the Palestinian News Network (PNN) and the IMEMC.

The IMEMC, a media a centre, is a collaboration between Palestinian and International journalists to provide independent English language media coverage of Israel-Palestine.

5. Local HAMAS Leader

We had an opportunity to meet with HAMAS leader, Khalid Thwaib, former political prisoner, conflict resolution consultant, and preacher. He talked (through an interpreter) about the reasons for HAMAS and its struggle, and emphasized that as Islamist their battle “is against people occupying our land” not against Jews in general; and they would fight even the Arabs if they were the occupiers. Armed resistance against occupying forces, as what HAMAS is doing, is justified under international law, according to him, and thus their struggle does not make them terrorists.

He talked at length on the injustices experienced by the Palestinians not only in the hands of the Israeli occupiers but also in the complicity of many countries, particularly the United States. He also gave the “HAMAS vision of state” and provided explanation for their participation in the election. He added that “the Palestinian cause is not for Palestine alone; it is for the “entire Arab nations, for the entire Islamic world, for the entire world.” He ended with a wish: “I hope we meet again in better times, when we can all visit the holy sites, with the Wall down.”

The session was primarily a question and answer session, with very active participation from the members of the delegation. There would have been more questions but it was getting late and the speaker had to go.

6. Taking Stock

The remaining hour, before dinner with our respective hosts, was spent on taking stock of what we have gone so far. The session was filled with comments, both positive and negative, and suggestions on how we should proceed.

Day 5 (November 8) Bethlehem

1. Apartheid Wall, Beit Jala, Aida refugee camp, and Al Nu'man Village

Viewing of the infamous Separation Wall (a.k.a. Apartheid Wall) started with a representative of the Applied Research Institute – Jerusalem (ARIJ) giving us some information on the construction of the wall and telling some case histories of people whose lives were being destroyed because of the Wall

Sections of the wall snaking through areas in Palestine could be seen during the bus rides taking us to our various engagements. The effective imprisonment of Palestinians within this ugly concrete could easily be discerned. Nowhere, however, does the sheer injustice being done by the Wall more apparent and dramatically illustrated as in the area where the (supposed) tomb of the Biblical Rachel (wife of Jacob) was situated. Israel has confiscated properties to build walls surrounding Rachel's tomb (throughout history, a holy place for Jews, Christians and Muslims) closing the road that leads to it and building a military outpost around the tomb.

We walked along a section of the wall where a lot of protest graffiti were written (a cause for imprisonment for those who get caught). There were signs that many residents of the area had left, successfully harassed to abandon their homes.

Jewish settlements have been built on Palestinian lands and signs of new ones being built on expropriated land could be seen in Beit Jala (part of Greater Bethlehem), home to many Palestinian Christians.

The mission members visited the Church of the Nativity

2. Shepherds' Field and YMCA –

The Shepherd's Field in Beit Sahour (also part of Greater Jerusalem) is a field of olives, which in the Christian tradition was where the angel announced to the shepherds the birth of Jesus Christ. Some of the olive trees in the area are centuries old.

The area of Greater Bethlehem (Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour, and few other small villages), has seen their olive trees uprooted and destroyed by Israeli forces to give way to Jewish settlements, roads, the Wall, or simply to sabotage the livelihood of Palestinian farmers.

3. Adopting an Olive Tree

The great economic and symbolic value of the olive trees has drawn in many groups to save them from the systematic destruction of farms being done by Israel. One of these is the Olive tree Campaign, a project of East Jerusalem YMCA and YWCA of Palestine. The aim is to replant areas where trees have been destroyed and to replant the old uprooted trees. Part of the rituals adopted by the campaign is having solidarity partners, or those groups who express solidarity with the Palestinian cause to “adopt” replanted trees.

Peace for Life, in a ceremony led by its Moderator, Rev. Eunice Santana, adopted an uprooted olive tree replanted within the East Jerusalem YMCA grounds. The adoption is a symbolic gesture for a continuing support for the preservation of the olive trees of the commitment to be in solidarity with Palestine's struggle against occupation and injustice. We offered a little dedication (later to be inscribed on a marker) to our adopted tree:

*.A life-giving tree uprooted and ravaged by the occupation
Resistance will make it live and take root again
.in this ancient homeland where it belongs
As justice will triumph and make
.Peace in Palestine live again*

4. Fateh leader Fouad Koholy

The session was held in the conference hall of YMCA. Mr. Koholy gave the background of the peace process along with the main obstacles. He discussed the vital issues: settlements, the status of Jerusalem, water, borders, and the Palestinians' right of return. He narrated the various compromises that Fatah had to accept and the circumstances that made for the decision. Unlike most of the speakers we had listened to far, he did not consider the Oslo Accord to be an entire sell out. He considered the creation of the Palestinian authority, which carried with it the recognition of the Palestinian's right to a homeland as apposite step. He also touched on the issue between Fatah and Hamas.

A question and answer portion followed.

Day 6 (November 9) Public Forum

The public forum was the culminating activity of mission to Palestine. The whole-day forum was held in Paradise Hotel in Bethlehem and had for its theme (and title) “Palestine, Empire and Occupation: Taking the Faith Communities to the Front Lines.” Although it was designed as an integral whole, it was also meant to be the first part of the conference to be held in Amman two days after. It was to be a venue for the sharing of analyses with the Palestinians given that so many of them would be unable to attend the conference in Amman. It was also deemed that it was in this forum that the expectations of various Palestinian groups from the international community could be articulated, and on the part of the mission participants, a chance to make a response and pledge their commitment to the Palestinian cause.

The forum had speakers in either English or Arabic; simultaneous translation was provided.

The local committee was mainly responsible for organising the public forum although programme planning and the programme itself were jointly undertaken with the PFL secretariat.

Topics and Speakers

The Minister of Tourism from the Palestinian Authority, Dr. Khuloud Deibis, gave the welcome remarks. Nidal Abuzuluf of the East Jerusalem YMCA, a member of the local organizing committee, gave the opening remarks.

The thematic speakers on the subject, ***“Imperial Designs, Vassals, and the Autocracies in the Middle East”*** were as follows:

a) Omar Bhargouti, a Palestinian political analyst, doctoral student of philosophy at Tel Aviv University, who spoke about the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) and the non-violent resistance to Israeli apartheid. He made comparisons between the racist policies of with the South Africa during the Apartheid regime and that of the Israel's. He advocates for international sanctions and boycott against the apartheid regime of Israel in much the same way that there was an international sanction against South Africa's racism.

b) Riffa't Odeh Kassis, Palestinian human rights and political activist, formerly with WCC-E APPI, current world president of defence for children international. He spoke on the geopolitics of the Middle East, gave a historical account of colonialism in the region from the Roman times up to the current U.S. Empire project; also the resistance from the occupied population and the rise of fundamentalism in the Arab region.

c) Uri Davis, an Israeli anthropologist born to Jewish parents in Jerusalem. Dr. Davis addressed to topic “Imperial Designs, Vassals and Autocracies of the Middle East by giving the characteristics of the US and its policies in the ME, the countries in the region, Israel and its role in the US imperial designs, which he enumerated as US economic interests; oil resources; and the correlation of military control and oil resources.

In the open forum that followed, discussion touched on the relationship of the United States with Israel and strength of the Zionist lobby, the interests of the Arab states, and the possibility of a global action that does not rely on UN concurrence.

Moderator for the session was Eilert Rostrup from Karibu Foundation of Norway

The second panel discussed ***“Complexities of Palestine Resistance to the Reign of Terror”*** with the following speakers:

a) Jeremy Milgrom, American-born Rabbi who moved to Israel some four decades, co founder of Clergies for Peace, an Israeli/Palestinian interfaith initiative. He took a personal look at the various predicaments and difficulties in his engagement in the struggle against the injustices in Palestine.

b) George Rishmawi, Palestinian activist, coordinator for Siraj Center for Holy Land Studies, and cofounder of the International Solidarity Movement.

He analysed the struggles being waged against the occupation in Palestine and pointed and pointed to the need for more creative forms of struggle along with the necessity for greater participation not only of people in Palestine but of the international community as well. He discussed the first and the second Intifada, their strengths and weaknesses.

c) Iyad Burnat, Palestinian, Head of the Popular Committee of Bil'in
He dwelt on local action of the affected communities and presented their case history, their struggle to save their village, their olive trees, life itself.

The open forum that followed was on the nature of struggle being waged in Palestine and the peace movement in Israel; also on the tendency of the resistance (and its international supporters) to focus more on symptoms and not the cause.

The last session was ***“Taking the International Faith Communities to Task”***
This panel had for its speakers members of the mission. It was meant to give the Palestinians in attendance a “report” of what the international community had been doing on the issue of Palestine; also to provide an added perspective as to issues and the nature of anti-empire struggles being waged in other countries.

The speakers were

a) Junaid Ahmad, a Pakistani-born JD student in the US involved with the Center for Progressive Islam and other groups articulating Islamic liberation theology

b) Desmond Keith Jagger-Parsons, an ordained minister of the United Church of Canada and was connected with Kairos Canada at the time of the mission.

d) Nimalka Fernando, a lawyer and women's rights activist from Sri Lanka, president of the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR) and the Women's Forum for Peace in Sri Lanka

Moderator was David Wildman, a long-time advocate of Palestinian rights and the executive secretary of Human Rights and Racial Justice, Mission Contexts and Relationships of the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) of the United Methodist Church of the U.S.A.

The closing remarks were given by Carmencita Karagdag, coordinator of Peace for Life and Yusef Daher of the WCC Jerusalem Inter-church Centre.

The forum was ended with a short cultural program and prayer led by Rev. Eunice Santana from Puerto Rico, PFL Moderator.

Day 7 (November 10)

The morning of the last day in Palestine was scheduled to be spent in Jericho, a place very close to the Amman border. But we had to forgo the earlier plan because it was a Saturday and the border would close at noon.

Our last stop before the border was the Badil Resource Centre for Palestine Residency and Refugee Rights. It is a centre established in 1998 to support the development of a popular refugee lobby for the right of return and calls on states to undertake sanctions against Israel and prosecute Israeli officials responsible for crimes against humanity and war crimes in the OPT. Mohammad Jaradat gave the briefing which gave a comprehensive picture of the situation of Palestinian refugees both internally and those outside Palestine.

On the Road Itself

The mission members spent a fairly good enough time on the road, which in itself was educational. In addition to the information (anecdotes and, at times, jokes, including those about Yaser Arafat) that the assigned travel guide or David provided, the day-to-day sights gleaned from the bus windows gave the members of the group an intimate feel, albeit in fast pans, of the life in Palestine. The Wall was a ubiquitous presence, making it all the more sinister; checkpoints, too, and the colour coded signs that signify the entry into the A, B, or C areas along with the license plates that would allow or disallow the riders the use of certain roads.

AMMAN CONFERENCE ON JUSTICE FOR PALESTINE

Opening Ceremony

The opening ceremony of the conference was held in the late afternoon of November 10. The brief programme had the General Secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches giving the welcome address. Yusef Daher and Rev. Qais Sadiq of the Ecumenical Study Centre, the local host in Amman, gave messages. The Keynote address on the theme, ***“Breaking the Yoke of Empire and Occupation: People of Faith with Palestine in Struggle”***, was delivered by Rev. Eunice Santana.

Reverend Santana’s keynote underscored our common humanity, struggles, and aspirations: “Regardless of our cultures, religions, places of origin, gender, language, race or colour, we are united and bound together by our understanding of justice and our thirst and hunger for justice in Palestine and at home.” She pointed to the interconnectedness of all struggles for liberation and identified the common source of oppression: a system that builds power to control the world, puts profits over people, builds empires, and fosters competitions and enmities among communities and nations.

She focused on the need for unity among those victimised by this oppressive system: “We must raise our voices denouncing and rejecting the use of military might to humiliate, subjugate, and control. We must repudiate those who display their power through abusive means and the abuse of power. We must condemn this apartheid created by Israel and its military assault against the people of Palestine.”

Furthermore, she expressed the hope that people of various faiths would find in the teachings of their respective faiths the guidance to pursue true solidarity. “Buddhism insists on the respect of the right to life of all living things and calls us to see others suffering as one’s own. Judaism instructs us in the Torah to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. Christianity and Islam contribute, besides the love of neighbour, the image of the body in which we are likened to parts of the body, which are connected to each other, and when one part hurts, the entire body is in pain and when one part receives special attention and rejoices the entire body feels good.” She also called to mind Che Guevarra who considered the best quality of a revolutionary was to have the capacity to feel deeply any injustice committed against anyone anywhere in the world.

Panel Presentations

The full session started in the morning of the 11th with the orientation and the introduction of the participants given by PFL Coordinator.

A. Journey to the Occupied Land: Impressions and Reflections on the Voices of Struggle and Victims of Oppression.

This first part of the panel presentations was divided into four areas of interests and delivered by the following participants:

1. Jose Arcellana, a Methodist from the United States who reported on the mission with particular emphasis on the children. He noted that despite the circumstances of their dispossession they remain steadfast. To him the Wall provided the most forceful statement of the Israeli policy toward the Palestinians. He also noted the checkpoints, the Jewish settlements sprouting on hilltops all Palestinian lands, the by-pass roads, the olive groves and how they were being destroyed.

2. Christiaan van der Merwe, South African took the subject “Living with Apartheid”. His first hand experience of the official racist policies of South Africa made his encounter with the realities in Palestine, the Wall especially, to bring back the brutal memories of Apartheid. He said that racism as an ideology could make people blind to its injustices. He likened it to a powerful drug that that made people feel the high of superiority.

3. Irfan Engineer, a Muslim lawyer from India
Having served jail time as a political prisoner in India, he had felt being in jail while in the occupied Palestine. He also touched on the misuse of religion in the pursuit of Zionist ideology.

4. Priti Shah, a Hindu born in India, now a resident of Canada
She described her adherence to Hinduism as away of life, not as a religion: peace, love, compassion. She had seen the same adherence to the basic principles from among the Palestinians who were of different faiths. Being involved with refugees in Canada, she took particular notice of the situation of the Palestinian refugees, now in their third generation.

Moderator of the session was David Wildman, a member of the PFL Mid-East Sub Group.

B. The Empire, Middle East and Israel's Occupation of Palestine

This panel was designed to start where the public forum in Palestine left off. The first two presentations contained the analyses of Palestinians as discussed in the public forum held inside Palestine two days earlier.

1. Nidal Abuzuluf and George Rishmawi made the presentations for “Views from the Occupied Land”

They focused on the central issues that needed to be addressed by the peace process along with its history and noted the involvement of the international community, mainly the United States and certain European countries.

2. Elias Halabi of the World Student Christian Federation – Middle East (WSCF-ME) based in Lebanon gave the “Reflections from the Middle East.” The presentation focused on the areas of concern of the neighbouring Arab countries, with specific emphasis on the Christian communities.

3. Ninan Koshy, author and political analyst from India, provided the theoretical and geopolitical analysis in “The Nature of Empire”. Dr. Koshy gave a comprehensive view of the US global agenda and its focus on the Middle East, its importance, which

transcended control of oil resources. Central to the analysis was the programme for the unrivalled US supremacy as articulated in the New American Century, which produced the outline of a democratic *Pax Americana* in the Middle East.

Eilert Rostrup from Norway was moderator of the session.

The open forum that followed included comments and anecdotes of Palestinian participants' personal experiences along with questions and suggestions about how the overall social justice movement can best confront the problems of empire, also the relationship of individual country struggles to that of the liberation of Palestine.

C. Justice and the Liberation of Palestine: Theological Discourses

The session had for its specific topic “*Occupation, Resistance, Violence and the Right to Exist: Views from Judaism, Christianity and Islam*”

Presenters were Jeremy Milgrom, American-born Rabbi; Yousef Al-Herimi, Palestinian professor of Islam, world civilization, and logical thinking at Al-Quds University; and Mark Lewis Taylor, American professor of Theology and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Rabbi Milgrom characterised what he called the two main points of view of Judaism: the classic Judaism and the more contemporary, which diverted to nationalism. In classic Judaism the emphasis is the covenant with God that both empowers and punishes. It is about a religious culture. According to him experience of occupation and revolts in the entire history of the Jewish people had a profound influence on the text, which is, thus, full of aspirations for liberation. The other form focuses on nationalism and can be seen as a secular form. He also made distinction between the two currents' notion of the land. He finished in a hopeful note: “Judaism has vitality and more recent changes emphasize universalism and humanism.”

Dr. Al-Herimi focused on the nature of Islam. He gave extensive on citations from the Koran on its fundamental tenets rooted in justice. He called to attention how Islamic civilisation had focused on justice and tolerance and pointed the stark difference between the treatment of minority Jews in the Ottoman Empire and those of Muslims under the current Jewish occupation. He didn't think there was much in the Koran regarding resistance; and certainly nothing about self destruction as a method.

Dr. Taylor for his part pointed to classical Christianity's imperial form and thus the necessity for the reframing of the belief system as well as the stories. His notion was that the more profound message of Christianity is that God is not just the Almighty one above the earth, but as an all-pervasive spirit throughout all of creation, liberating in relation to one another. Such a reframing, he said, would make Christianity at one with the essence of other religions and in agreement with the spirituality of belief systems of other nations. He felt the need for theology to impinge ideologies in our nations, one that is “rooted not only in the church and in the academy, but also in the people's movements for social change occurring in other sectors of public life.”

D. Experiencing the Women of Conflict and Occupation

This panel dealt with personal histories and encounters with women in conflict areas, how they cope with the difficulties of their distinct circumstances and their active participation in the resistance. Speakers were Alexa Abi Habib of the Middle East Council

of Churches, based in Cyprus; Elsy Wakil of the Ecumenical Popular Education Program (EPEP), an organisation with offices across the Arab world; Nimalka Fernando from Sri Lanka, president of the International Movement against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR). Moderator for the session was Carmencita Karagdag of Peace for Life.

Ms. Abi Habib described how women in the Middle East in general remained subject to discrimination under various customs and traditions for which religion alone could not be entirely responsible. Ms. Wakil narrated about the heavier burden on women in Lebanon as a result of wars and emigration; also, religious revivalism's role in eroding the social gains of the women's struggles. Ms. Fernando called to attention the more universal power relations that render groups (nations, ethnic groups, women, etc.) to be subjugated by another.

In the open forum the experience of the Dalits of India was brought up as well as the cases of refugees and migrant workers. Additional inputs on the Palestinian women's participation in the resistance were provided by delegates from Palestine.

E. Taking the Challenge: Linking Palestinian Struggle with Global Resistance against Empire

The last panel session was directed towards the formulation of action plans that would be implemented under the auspices of the Peace for Life network or independently by the various groups represented in the conference. Three of the four speakers, Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta from Canada, Na'eem Jeenah from South Africa, and David Wildman from the United States have been active in solidarity actions and involved in programmes in support of Palestine liberation. Bishop Aldo Etchegoyen from Argentina was the fourth speaker. Moderator was Gabriel Habib.

Overall the presentations made the connection between the struggle for the liberation of Palestine and all the other struggles for liberation around the world, how international solidarity would be essential in bringing them together. There were also updates on various initiatives being done worldwide, particularly those involving faith communities. Ms Kaufman-Lacusta's presentation focused on the aspects of the non-violent resistance against the Israeli occupation, including the participation of Jewish groups.

F. People of Faith and Conviction: Dealing with the Empire and the Occupation of Palestine

A concluding presentation was done by Kim Yong-Bock of Korea. Dr. Yong- Bock, a veteran in the ecumenical movement, reiterated the call for the need for the convergence not only of actions but also of the spirituality of various faiths and ideological traditions. He also touched on the necessity for the liberation forces to reclaim the concept of peace from the Empire, which has appropriated it for its own interests.

Workshops and Group Discussions

The workshops came in two stages: Group discussions in the middle of the conference, which was primarily designed to discuss the conference's analysis of the Palestine issue vis-à-vis empire as it would be presented in the conference statement, which in turn would form the basis for programmes and action plans. Christopher Ferguson of WCC took charge of leading the discussions and consolidating the output of the various groups.

The second part, the workshop meant to detail specific action plans, came in at the end of the thematic sessions.

Conference Statement

The drafting committee was composed by Christopher Ferguson (Chair), Na'eem Jeenah, Ranjan Solomon, and Vivian de Lima. The draft was subjected to a thorough discussion at the plenary.

The closing document, "Pledge of Commitment: Breaking the Yoke of Empire and Occupation" contained not only the pledge to undertake a sustained action, but it is also a definitive analysis of the nature of the Israeli occupation and the role it plays in the overall US imperial designs on the entire Middle East. The document will lay the basis for the faith communities' action in solidarity with the Palestinians struggle for liberation and justice.

A press communiqué in two languages (English and Arabic) based on the statement was circulated online and distributed to the press during the press conference held on the last day of the conference. It was published in full in the national newspaper in Jordan

The conference gave the following commitments:

- To convene an interfaith reflection event on the spirituality of resistance and counter-imperial faith preferably in Jerusalem, initiated by Peace for Life;
- To take part in activities to mark the 60th anniversary of the *Nakba* (2008) and link these with Peace for Life programmes;
- To be responsive to and vigilant of the media to ensure that the Palestinian situation is justly interpreted and an alternative narrative finds space.
- To inform and gather our network, especially from the global South, to visit the Occupied Palestinian Territories and to have Palestine storytellers a chance to relate their stories to people in countries closely allied with Israel;
- To organise active participation in existing BDS (*Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel*) campaigns, and for PfL to focus one specific action campaign;
- To intensify lobbying efforts with government bodies, multilateral agencies, and the United Nations to enforce Israeli compliance with international law and UN resolutions.

AFTERWORD

A full evaluation of the both the conference and the mission still needs to be undertaken. There was a brief review session on the conduct of the mission during the Palestine trip, but time was limited which made a comprehensive assessment impossible. Despite the limitation, however, the participants were able to point to the more essential merits and demerits of the programme. The details, as discussed, will be contained in the proceedings.

On the conference in Amman, the caucus of Pfl's Continuation Committee held immediately after the conference made a preliminary assessment. Overall, the peace and solidarity mission to Palestine-Israel was evaluated as a success. Many participants considered the experience "life-changing."

The local partners also expressed great appreciation for the programme. It was mentioned that Pfl should become part of the WCC 's Palestine-Israel Ecumenical Forum in recognition for its advocacy work on Palestine.

The discourse on the role of the empire in the Palestinian question along with extensive discussion on religion, how it is at the same time a tool for subjugation and for dividing people and a force for liberation and unity was of particular interest to many participants.

The Pfl caucus took special note on the interfaith composition of the international delegation, and considered the current activity as a significant step in the development of Pfl as an interfaith movement, but it expressed the hope that in future activities local hosts and organizers also include groups from non-Christian faith traditions.

One of the shortcomings of the mission cited was that the exposure programme did not provide a schedule where the members could experience communities within the OPT. There was not much opportunity for interaction with people in their settings, or meeting basic community organisations and women's groups.

The 2nd People's Forum on Peace for Life will take on the subject of the Palestinian occupation and Middle East Peace as the central thematic concern. The perspective gained from both the mission and the conference will serve as the context from which the forum will be organised. A meeting of the Pfl Subgroup on Middle East is scheduled in March to draw up concrete plans for follow-up action and to generate initial ideas for the 2008 Peoples Forum, to be held also in the Middle East.

(Prepared by Vivian de Lima, Pfl Secretariat, 10 March 2008)

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