

CIVILIAN PEACEMAKERS: SPEAKING TRUTH – SEEKING JUSTICE

by
Germana Nijim



I have come to the conclusion that peacemaking should be placed in the hands of civilians. Politicians who act from behind polished desks in well-appointed offices, and military personnel who act from behind helicopter gunships, tanks or bulldozers are more inclined to think in terms of political careers, of their place in history, of “winning” than they are in peacemaking. In order to truly want to make peace, it helps to first come face-to-face with the horrors of war. One must see the face of the child standing among the ruins of her bulldozed home, see the face of the elderly woman standing powerless at a military checkpoint, see the face of the teenage soldier holding the power of life and death in his hands, see the face of demonstrators who hunger for peace.

Civilians do not rely on arms to resolve conflicts because they know that peace cannot come through force. They have no personal agenda other than a passion for justice. I retired from the University of Northern Iowa in December 2000, after serving as Director of International Services for twenty-two years. My plan was to pursue a college dream of my early sixties: that of joining the Peace Corps and serving in the Middle East. But, disenchanted with what I perceived as excessive bureaucracy, I finally put the old dream to rest, and pursued other options.

I looked for volunteer opportunities in Occupied Palestine, and I was fortunate to have a friend introduce me to Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), an organization based in Chicago, IL, whose motto appealed to me immediately: "Getting in the Way." Mindful of the saying that all it takes for evil to succeed is for good people to do nothing, "getting in the way" of violence and abuse of human rights became for me a driving force. Military occupation is by its very nature violent, oppressive and abusive. Showing solidarity with those living under occupation seemed the logical way to serve my neighbor.

CPT is supported by the Church of the Brethren, Friends United Meeting, and the Mennonite Church (of USA and Canada). Since 1995, by invitation of the Hebron Municipality, CPT has maintained a continuing presence in Hebron, West Bank, where frequent curfews confined thousands of Palestinians to their homes, often for days at a time, especially since the Second Intifada of September 2000. CPT also established a temporary presence in particularly troubled spots, such as Bethlehem and Beit Ummar, a small village close to Hebron, where land expropriation by the occupying army had turned life into a nightmare for the villagers.

CPT volunteers conduct daily street patrols, escort children to school, visit families living under House Demolition Orders from the Israeli government, participate in joint activities with Israeli and Palestinian peace groups to expose the realities of military occupation, and sometimes stand as buffer between armed Israeli soldiers and Palestinian protesters. Reports of their activities are regularly sent to the central office of Chicago, where a website is maintained and frequently updated. Volunteers are fully responsible for all of their expenses, and sign a Statement of Personal Responsibility, acknowledging and accepting the possibility that they might be "imprisoned, taken hostage, injured or even killed." They walk into war zones with their eyes wide open, determined to speak the truth, seek justice and lay down their lives if necessary. Daily prayers and occasional fasting strengthen the volunteers' commitment and keep them focused on their goal. Living quarters are minimally furnished. Beds consist of floor mats that turn out to be surprisingly comfortable. Volunteers share in housekeeping tasks and live a frugal life, conserving both the environment and the scarce natural resources, like water. Their only luxuries are the ubiquitous and indispensable cell phone, which keeps them in touch with one another and reassures them of one another's safety, and a computer with Internet access that allows e-mail communication with the main office in Chicago and with their families.

Since the volunteers do not seek martyrdom, when there is shooting they take a prudent stance and stay indoors.

New volunteers may choose to participate in an initial two-week delegation to Hebron, Colombia, Chiapas (Mexico) or other trouble spots both in the U.S. and abroad. Successfully completing the two-week term makes them eligible for one month of free intensive training in conflict resolution and other peacemaking skills. They may then choose to become full-time Peacemaker Corps Members or Reservists, who commit themselves to serve for two weeks to two months or more at a time over a three-year period.

Our seven-member delegation—each from a different U.S. state and one from Canada—was scheduled to leave on April 1, 2002. With some trepidation, we congregated in Toronto for the flight to Tel Aviv, since all of us were new at this peacemaking venture. The Israeli occupation had become more aggressive late in March, imposing curfews on whole towns and villages; attacking Chairman Arafat's compound in Ramallah; creating roadblocks preventing the movement of people and goods and separating families; and causing incredible hardships for Palestinians, many of whom lost their lives. Moreover, two international observers were killed by gunmen in Hebron, our chosen destination, just two days prior to our arrival.

In spite of the increasing tensions, as far as I was concerned, the die was cast. The other four women and two men must have felt the same way since there was no thought of withdrawal or cancellation. Our team leader, the experienced CPT Corps Member, was waiting for us in Jerusalem. We would not let him down.

The sky opened and rain poured on us as we drove from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. I chose to interpret this as a benediction. Arid countries badly need the rain, I reminded myself, and I fought the chill with a borrowed sweater to wear under my not-so-warm jacket. It was past ten at night by the time our Israeli driver dropped us off in front of the hostel where our leader was waiting for us and where we were to spend that first night. Four bunk beds in the room accommodated all of us. We wrapped ourselves in warm clothes and thanked God for a safe journey.

In the morning we discovered that the rain had not stopped, and the ceiling was leaking both in the bathrooms and the breakfast room. The van we hired to take us to Hebron was also leaking in various parts, and one of

the delegates spent the trip holding a paper cup under the constant dripping, occasionally emptying it out of the window. CPT does not own cars so all volunteers rely solely on taxis and buses. Public transportation shows severe signs of wear-and-tear, as Palestinians find it increasingly more difficult to make a living because of closures and curfews. Car parts are tied together with rope; seats are reinforced with wooden planks, and as long as the engine runs, the vehicle qualifies as a taxi.

We had our first taste of a military checkpoint shortly after we reached the outskirts of Jerusalem. No, the Israeli soldier told the driver, the car could not pass because Palestinians were not allowed on the road. We were struck by the irony that this very nice highway had been built with American dollars, but because the driver was a Palestinian, we were also barred from traveling on it. The driver made a U-turn and, experienced in finding alternative routes, drove us through narrow and twisted country roads, bypassing the checkpoint and reaching our destination in only three-times as long as it would have taken us on the highway. We considered ourselves lucky to have been told immediately that we could not go through; a car full of Palestinians might be made to wait an hour or more before being denied passage. Checkpoints have put a stranglehold on virtually every Palestinian village and town. Passage is granted or denied at the whim of the soldiers on duty, who do not hesitate to point their machine guns at both Palestinians and foreigners without provocation. Sometimes the presence of Americans smooths the way. Sometimes not.

We walked through the old market in Hebron, where Palestinians greeted us with smiles, handshakes and expressions of welcome. CPT is well known in the area, and is well respected by the Palestinians. Israeli soldiers and settlers have a different opinion of CPT, since CPT-ers get in their way. For example, a CPT worker observed two soldiers chasing a Palestinian young man into a building and went to investigate. "Go away! None of your business!" the soldiers shouted at her; to which she replied: "Oh, but it is my business, because, you see, it is my tax money that pays for your rifle and your ammunition." This is not something of which Israelis like to be reminded. This is getting in the way. And at least this time it had the effect of stopping the soldiers from further harassing the young man.

Curfews apply only to Palestinians, not to Jewish settlers living nearby. Sometimes, teenage settlers take advantage of the situation to cause mischief. They break into shops, upset carts and write anti-Arab graffiti on the walls. Since there seems to be a tacit understanding that CPT volunteers

are also exempt from curfews, they are sometimes able to stop the destruction of property. But these confrontations can be volatile. Settlers are armed, and Israeli soldiers, posted in the area on a three-to-one ratio for the protection of settlers, are disinclined to interfere with their countrymen, and more often than not turn a blind eye on their mischief. Soldiers usually warn visitors against going to the Arab section of town because it is "dangerous" to go there. But for CPT workers, the danger comes from the settlers, who go as far as uttering occasional death threats against them or calling them Arab-lovers or Nazis.

CPT workers have made many attempts at befriending Israeli soldiers and settlers in the Hebron area, but with very little success. The volunteers have therefore been unable to bring Israelis and Palestinians together to dialogue and to get to know one another as people, but they do not give up. They keep trying hoping that some day Jews and Arabs will see themselves in the others and wish for them what they themselves long for: a home, a family, a community, a job, and freedom from harm.

Much of the work of CPT consists in listening to the people living under occupation, in trying to understand their fears, their daily humiliations, their frustration, their anger, their impotence, and their longing for a normal life. We visited the site of a home that was blown up the night before and looked on, aghast at the destruction. People had apparently been given no time to retrieve their belongings. Pieces of furniture and clothes dangled from the ruins and fluttered in the wind, while piles of rubble stood at our feet. We looked around us at the crowd gathered there and tried to imagine how it feels to lose one's home, to see the savings and dreams of a lifetime reduced to rubble. "This is the work of your president" people said to us. But the bitterness in their voices was against American policy, not against us personally.

Palestinians perceive the U.S. as the enabler of Israeli intransigence and the provider of means for the Palestinians' destruction. "We are used to this," they said sadly to us. "We will see more of it. But there is a God!" The faith that their suffering is not going unnoticed by the Almighty gives them dignity and endurance. We apologized to the dispossessed, but they smiled at us and declared us innocent of our government's misguided policies. Four days after the explosion, in what has become a typical response, the village came together to help rebuild the demolished home. The solidarity and courage amongst people living under the gun, on the brink of despair, is nothing short of astounding.

Collective punishment, like house demolition and curfews, is against the Geneva Convention, but Israel has shown disregard if not downright contempt towards international conventions. United Nations resolutions are passed and filed away only to be used in fruitless and endless debate. With the backing of the United States, Israel does not feel bound by them, while Palestinians continue to believe that only the implementation of U.N. resolutions will bring justice and peace to the Middle East.

Palestinians distrust Israel's claim that it wants peace. They point to the fact that 80% of building activity since 1967 has been on the West Bank. Construction of new settlements and expansion of existing settlements have gone on uninterrupted under every Israeli administration even as the United States kept repeating the useless refrain that illegal settlements are "an impediment to peace." All settlements are illegal according to the IV Geneva Convention – 1949 Protocol, since they are built on occupied land, and they were established by the occupying power at the expense of the indigenous population. This usurpation of land has brought about bizarre situations such as what exists in the Gaza Strip. Israeli settlements in Gaza have been providentially built on aquifers, and the settlers living there are willing to sell drinking water to the Palestinians, whose only alternative is to import drinking water from Egypt. The latter alternative is not feasible, given that Gaza has an unemployment rate that has risen to 75% or higher.

At the home of an Israeli living in West Jerusalem we were told: "Israel is here to stay. It owns the land by force. It is not a question of justice. It is a question of power." He claimed that he had never heard that there was a water problem for Palestinians. He did not seem to know that, according to Jeff Halper, the Israeli founder of Israel Committee Against House Demolition, a settler is allowed 400 liters of water per day, to the 70 liters for a Palestinian. And it is common knowledge that Israelis may water their lawns and swim in their swimming pools while water is cut off at will in nearby Palestinian villages.

Ninety thousand housing units have been built for settlers since 1967. While the occupancy rate in the settlements has decreased to approximately 70% in recent years, Palestinian homes are demolished without concern as to what will happen to the homeless. These victims of home demolition are sometimes taken in by relatives, or live in Red Cross-issued tents for months at a time, in all kinds of weather. Meanwhile, settlement houses lie vacant.

CPT is strictly a peacemaking organization, offering organized, non-violent alternatives to war. It does not provide assistance in the form of subsidies or goods. This activity is left to other entities designed for that purpose. Palestinians are reduced to survive only with the help of Christian, Muslim and Jewish charitable organizations, which work indefatigably and at great personal risk to bring food supplies and medical assistance to those living under curfew, challenging the authority of soldiers at the myriad of permanent and impromptu checkpoints around the country. Of the Christian organizations operating in the area, World Vision is the most prominent, working in conjunction with Pax Christi, Catholic Charities, and the Lutheran World Federation. Goods are delivered to pre-arranged points of distribution, where families may come and collect them when curfew is lifted. Poverty, lack of medical care, and improper nutrition especially affect the elderly and the very young.

One of the most gratifying activities for CPT workers is to participate in peace demonstrations organized by Israelis protesting the occupation, calling for the dismantlement of illegal settlements and the establishment of a free and independent Palestinian state. We held an emotional candlelight march through West Jerusalem to pray on the site of the devastation and death caused by a suicide bomber in a popular pizza parlor and stopped along the way to listen to the fears and anger of Israelis.

Women in Black meet every Friday afternoon in a central place in West Jerusalem and endure the jeers and obscenities of passers-by. **Peace Now** has a permanent place a block from Ariel Sharon's house, where Jewish protesters are joined by people of other faiths to show the number of Israelis and Palestinians killed since the Second Intifada and to demand "Not One More Drop of Blood!" **B'Tselem – The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories** analyzes Israeli policies, documents abuses and speaks out against the occupation. The previously mentioned **Israel Committee Against House Demolitions** stages demonstrations to bring media attention to the practice; whenever possible, it mediates between the Israeli government and Palestinians served with House Demolition Orders; and it raises funds to help rebuild demolished homes. In the United States, **Jewish Voices for Peace, Not in My Name, Jews for Middle East Understanding** and **New Israel Fund** are a few of the organizations that support the cause of justice and peace. Only in solidarity with so many civilians of good will can one keep hoping in and working for a world where justice will eventually triumph.

As a civilian peacemaker, I believe that the following principles, based on international legitimacy, must be achieved for a lasting peace:

1. Israel must admit that, in the words of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, Israel "is neither innocent, nor redemptive." Reconciliation is possible only when in humility we recognize our wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness.
2. A free, independent, sovereign Palestinian state is established within the 1967 borders.
3. Jerusalem is shared and becomes the capital of each state, Israel and Palestine.
4. The Right of Return, which now gives *any* Jew in the world the right to "return" to Israel, must be extended to include Palestinian refugees from 1948 to the present.
5. All illegal settlements within the Occupied Territories are dismantled or given over to the Palestinian Authority as compensation for years of occupation.

CPT has given me the opportunity to learn first-hand about the issues that keep the Middle East conflict alive. I have been alternatively filled with hope and despair, but I stand ready to serve again as a civilian peacemaker, finding strength in the thought that our world is one, and it belongs to God, and that at the end of the day justice will prevail, even if not in my lifetime.

Germana Nijim is retired from UNI where she was Director of the Office of International Services. In 2002 she was a Christian Peacemaker Team (CPT) Volunteer in the Middle East. She currently lives in Cedar Falls, Iowa.