

Urgent Action

In Focus

An insight into the stories behind UAs

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Amnesty International in the Occupied Territories



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Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International, led a mission to Lebanon and Israel and the Occupied Territories (including the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) to discuss human rights issues with members of the government and civil society between 2 and 11 December. Below are extracts of blogs written during her mission.

Please see the entire blog at: http://blogs.amnesty.org/blogs/israelot_dec06

On the road south from Beirut

As we gathered at the hotel very early in the morning, getting ready to head off south on the first day of our mission in Lebanon, security was uppermost in our minds. First aid kits were put in the boot of the van and we were told to be careful about unexploded ordinance.

But, once we were on the road, there was a sense of tranquillity. Just like any early Sunday morning, vendors were opening their stalls, displaying colourful fruit and vegetables and traffic was light. What a contrast to the lively scenes of mass demonstrations in central Beirut that were dominating the TV screens!

As we drove past the southern suburbs of Beirut, all too soon the postcard-like picture ended,

superseded by stark reminders of a country that has just come out of a devastating war that killed more than a thousand people and devastated the infrastructure. Near the airport, there was a huge mountain of rubble removed from bombed-out sites of Beirut. We drove off the highway onto slip roads to avoid the gaping holes that had once been bridges.

Further along, there was yet another example of the terrible toll the war had taken on the environment that still persisted. At Jiyeh, we saw workers continuing to drain the damaged oil tanks that had been bombed and had spilt their contents into the Mediterranean, creating an enormous slick.

The sea was a sparkling blue, but with no boats

in sight. The Lebanese fishermen suffered enormously in the war and in its aftermath: some ports were destroyed, the blockade stopped many of them from fishing for weeks and, even after that was lifted, the oil spill robbed them of their livelihood.

Beirut – a city of demonstrations

The images of crowds demonstrating outside the Prime Minister's office in the centre of Beirut have dominated TV screens around the world. Yet, this morning, as we approached the Prime Minister's office, the demonstrators' camp was quiet as we cleared police and army checkpoints.

In contrast, in the evening, as we made our way to the TV studios to do a live interview for a UK news programme, the square was packed with people. Even from afar, as we passed army checkpoints, we could hear the shouting and chanting in the square.

On one side of the street, divided by coils of razor wire, some soldiers were standing guard by their tanks and others sleeping in cots and tents set up on sidewalks. And, on the other, young demonstrators chanted and jumped up and down between the tents they'd set up.

Ironically, while the news agenda is captivated by the demonstrations in Beirut, yesterday, when we were in the south, the only reference to the demonstrations was made by the Mayor of Qana, who said that the government was effectively not functioning and decisions needed in order to carry on with the reconstruction were not being taken.

A special tent

Among the many white tents recently set up by the political opposition in Beirut's main square, there is a single green one. It is not adorned with flags, but with grainy and dated pictures of men mainly of different ages, some in military uniform. Inside it are not young and semi-festive protesters, but a group of elderly, quiet women.

Their tent has been there for over one year. It is the tent of the families of the "disappeared".

We went to visit them as we left the glass facade of the UN main building in Beirut, late in the afternoon. As we arrived, walking past the other tents in the patch of a public green space, the women came out and arranged plastic chairs

for us and themselves in front of the tent.

All those in the tent were women -- mothers, wives, sisters of Lebanese men who "disappeared" from Lebanon in the past decades, most believed to have been taken to Syria. Some were Lebanese army soldiers, like Jihad George 'Eid, whose mother Sonia told us how she was actually able to see her son in the notorious "Palestine Branch" detention centre in Damascus in 1991 through a personal contact.

Jihad was chained to other prisoners and looked in ill-health. But this was 15 years ago, and now she is desperate to have news of him, as well as of the other detainees. Odette Salim does not know what happened to her son Richard and her daughter Marie-Christine since they "disappeared" in 1985 -- we talk about them in our 1997 annual report.

As we spoke, alternating Arabic and French, Rami Saliba of the Solidarity with Lebanese in Detention and Exile association (Solide) arrived. We knew him well. He described on camera for us the activities of the Association. We couldn't hear all the testimonies, but asked each woman to give us her name and the name of her "disappeared" relative.

They are desperate for news of the fate of their relatives and hold little hope that the political leaders in either Lebanon or Syria would take their plight seriously. We assured them we did.

Hebron - under strict Israeli military control

Hebron's old city market is now almost deserted, the atmosphere is eerie and most of the shops are closed. The area is surrounded by Israeli army checkpoints here and there.

This part of Hebron, known as "H2", is under strict Israeli military control and the movements of tens of thousands of Palestinian residents depend entirely on the decision of the Israeli soldiers. Often the Palestinian residents are placed under curfew, which do not apply to the 500 Israeli settlers who live in the area.

We are accompanied by a large contingent of journalists. The few Palestinian residents seem pleased to see us. Israeli settlers are less welcoming to international observers and attacks are not infrequent.

A couple of weeks ago, a Swedish woman was

attacked by Israeli settlers as she was escorting Palestinian children to school. They hit her in the face with a bottle and broke her cheekbone.

Wire nets have been placed over the narrow alleys, separating Jewish settlers from Palestinian shops, to prevent the settlers hurling objects and excrement at the Palestinian and international visitors. We pass through an Israeli army checkpoint, one by one, through the heavy metal turnstiles.

As we stop to look around, an Israeli soldier relays our movements to his colleagues through his radio. We keep our visit short because it is past sunset and it is not advisable to stay in the area after dark.

As we make our way out of the area, a foot patrol of Israeli soldiers pass our cars, viewing inside, while holding their machine-guns ready.

A kid's life in the divided city of Hebron

"Samer" glanced nervously over his shoulder at his garden gate as he told us his story. "I am not allowed to play in my garden -- and when I do go out there, I am scared of what's on the other side of the gate. I try to be brave for my family. It's something that I am used to, after all.

Samer is a smiling 12-year-old boy who likes to practice his English with us. He lives in Hebron, a Palestinian city that contains a settlement of some 400 Israeli settlers living in the centre of a city of 120,000 Palestinians. Not only that -- the Israeli settlement is right next to Samer's house. As a result, he and his family are no longer allowed by the Israeli soldiers to leave their house by its front gate, as it would take them through the settlement.

They must climb a steep dirt track to enter their home from the back -- the same way we entered last night. Once inside, they dare not lock their doors as Israeli soldiers warned that they want to be able to come and go as they please.

Samer's mother, "Nadia", says she never has a good night's sleep. "If we don't leave the doors open, we know they will simply blow them off. The soldiers often come at one or two in the morning and force us out of our beds to search our house."

Samer says the settler children on the other side of the gate never speak to him -- although the soldiers sometimes do. "When I am feeling

brave and try to play in the garden, the soldiers tell me to go away."

Samer's grandmother greets us warmly and then bursts into tears. She has just learnt of the death of a relative, but cannot attend his funeral as she is too old and too ill to clamber down the dirt track. "We are prisoners in our own home," says her daughter.

As we listened to the stories of Samer and his family, two Israeli soldiers suddenly entered the family garden in the dark and came up to the house. It was a tense moment. The soldiers demanded to see the IDs of our delegation, along with the IDs of the journalists filming our visit.

They seemed taken aback when the camera lights were turned on them and left shortly -- but not without making an impression. Samer's father was left shaking. Samer just shrugged and said again, "We are used to this."

As we leave, his mother tells us that, whenever they have visitors, the soldiers come back in the night, drag them out of the bed and turn their house upside down.

We make sure that someone will let us know if the soldiers come back that night to harass them so that we can raise this in our meeting with the Deputy Minister of Defense.

Names have been changed to protect the identity of the family.

[Dignity trampled](#)

Amnesty International in Israel and the Occupied Territories.

Today is International Human Rights Day. In 1948, on this day, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was born out of the ashes of suffering of the Second World War. That same year, the Palestinian human rights problem was born and, to date, remains unaddressed.

We marked this symbolic date in Israel and the Occupied Territories.

Our day started in the way that it starts for those few Palestinians that have permits to cross to Israel: queuing and waiting at Erez to cross between Israel and Gaza. The first of our colleagues to go through the second screening is asked to wait and stand aside by a private security guard who sees AI's latest briefing.

While she waits, they start checking another colleague's bags, including our files, and see more reports, causing more calls over the guard's radio -- so we clarify that all of us are carrying AI reports! A young Israeli soldier apologises for this. Four hours later and we're out, but we can only imagine what it must be like for ordinary Palestinians who face this daily.

As we make our way from Herez to the north of the West Bank, we drive through a well-developed part of Israel - it feels like being in Europe and is definitely a far cry from Gaza, with its poor roads and obvious overcrowding and poverty.

We arrived in the town of Jayus, a town of approximately 3,500 people where the fence/wall has separated the town's inhabitants from their citrus and olive groves that now lie on the other side. A farmer comes up in a tractor and tells us how he can no longer farm his land properly because he can't access it properly. Only people with the right passes can cross to their land through a gate which is meant to be open 12 hours a day, yet, in reality, we are told it is much less and not every day.

The farmers tell us that they think they are being forced to abandon their orchards so that they can be incorporated into the nearby settlement, as they are trying to force them to use a gate that will add an extra three hours for them to get to their fields on the other side of the fence/wall.

The town's mayor also tells us of his concern about natural resources since the fence/wall absorbs fertile land and water resources.

As we stand by the fence/wall, we ponder the real meaning of human rights.

What did human rights mean for those queuing in Gaza? What did they mean for that little girl in wheelchair trying to get to Israel to have an operation and separated from her mother in the queue and taken to a windowless room by an armed guard to be security-checked? What did human rights mean for the farmer in his tractor who couldn't farm his land? What did they mean for the Israeli boy in Sderot lying in hospital recovering from a qassam rocket attack?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the most concrete expression of people's aspiration to live with dignity. Yet it is being trampled because of the lack of principled leadership that

has not been willing to find a solution to this problem.

Around the world, whether in Darfur or Israel/Occupied Territories, civilians have borne the brunt of human rights abuse. Yet people live in hope that their leaders will respond to their call for decisive action that will ensure the human rights of all people are respected.

For more information about the recent conflict please see: UA 315/06, MDE 15/092/2006, 23 November 2006 and follow ups; UA 237/06 , MDE 15/080/2006, 1 September 2006; UA 212/06, MDE 15/074/2006, 07 August 2006 and follow ups; as well as other AI reports, press releases, and actions.