

KEEPING THE PEACE IN PALESTINE

Gwithian Doswell, a local Quaker, spoke to Faringdon Peace Group in June soon after her return from a 3 month trip to Palestine as an EAPPI (Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel)) volunteer with the World Council of Churches. At any one time there are 30 such volunteers in Palestine giving protection to vulnerable people, monitoring and reporting violations of human rights and international law and supporting both Palestinians and Israelis working for peace. They uphold the concept of principled impartiality and condemn all violence.

Gwithian was based in the South Hebron Hills in a small community trying to keep its land and way of life despite frequent military incursions and harassment from settlers. They are traditional herders who have lived there for generations in caves, tents and simple structures. Gwithian gave protection and reduced tension just by being there as an international, as the Israelis knew they were being observed. She accompanied shepherds who suffered intimidation and attacks from settlers when travelling long distances to find grazing and water. She travelled to and from school with children who otherwise felt vulnerable, in a jeep that was in danger of confiscation. The last one had been taken and destroyed by the army.

She explained that the residents live in constant fear of eviction. They live in Area C which is under total Israeli control, in a 'Firing Zone' which is used for military training. In the 1990s, 700 people were evicted from the area, wells were filled in, caves blocked up and livestock left unattended. A few months later they were allowed back but with an injunction which forbade building of any sort, even essentials such as latrines, solar power or water supply. In 70% of Area C no building permits are given to Palestinians and 'illegal' buildings are likely to be demolished. While Gwithian was there the villagers tried to repair the road at their own expense with a hired truck and 2 loads of gravel. The military confiscated the truck and made them remove the gravel.

Under the terms of the 4th Geneva Convention, as an occupying power, Israel has a responsibility to look after the occupied population. Forcible transfer and destruction of property are forbidden and the occupier cannot settle its own population in an occupied area. Gwithian, like the other EAPPI volunteers, observed and recorded many violations of this and other laws, but was encouraged by the steadfastness of the Palestinians and the commitment of the many Israeli peace-makers she met. In telling people's stories to groups like ours she hopes to spread awareness of the issues and encourage us to take them up with our elected representatives.