

***Sabeel* Statement on Abu Ghneim ('Har Homa')**

"Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! ...Yet they lean upon the Lord and say, 'Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us'. Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins..."(Micah 3:9-10).

Israel's Project

On Tuesday, March 18, 1997, Israeli bulldozers started their work to build a new Jewish settlement on Jabal Abu Ghneim, near Bethlehem, contrary to the expressed wish of the international community. The intention is to build 6,500 housing units for 25,000 Jewish settlers on approximately 462 acres. It is Palestinians, rather than Jews, who have dire housing needs. Even while there are huge vacant land areas in West Jerusalem (much of it Palestinian owned before 1948), and more than 12 percent vacant apartments even in the settlements on the West Bank and Gaza (all illegal), Israel confiscates more Palestinian land. A major objective of the project is to ensure Jewish demographic superiority in the Jerusalem area.

The beautiful and serene landscape overlooking Bethlehem will be ruined, and will be replaced by apartments, shopping centers, and high-rise hotels that will transform the beauty of nature into vulgar stone structures. But whatever its architectural value and ecological damage, the project is unjust.

Injustice

The building of the settlement is an act of injustice against the people from whom the land has been confiscated. Politically, it aims at closing the circle of exclusively Jewish settlements around Palestinian Jerusalem and changing its demographic character. It is a further step in Judaizing Jerusalem before the final status talks. It aims at weakening Palestinian claim over East Jerusalem by creating new facts on the ground, which will hinder the attainment of their legitimate national aspiration.

Economically, building hotels, shopping centers and tourist industries on the settlement, Israel will devour the tourist trade from the Palestinian towns of Bethlehem and Beit Sahour (Shepherds' Field) and deprive the Palestinians of their main livelihood. Bethlehem and Beit Sahour will be places where tourists will go for a brief visit while the economic benefits will be diverted and reaped by 'Bethlehem', Israel's Har Homa shopping center.

Moreover, the construction will threaten the remains of five fifth- and sixth-century Byzantine churches and monasteries in the area of Abu Ghneim. Israel has been less sensitive to Muslim and Christian sites than to Jewish ones.

The project reflects the arrogance of Israeli power, its obsession with domination over, and economic exploitation of the Palestinians. It has and will fuel resentment, deepen the hate, ensure the passion for revenge, and bring about an inevitable future of bloodshed and violence, already seen in the suicidal bombing in Tel Aviv on March 21, 1997, so rightly condemned as an inhuman act of terrorism.

We in *Sabeel* condemn the violence of the construction at Abu Ghneim, perpetrated by the State of Israel. It is a violence against the aspirations of a whole nation. It is a violence directed against the peace process. It is a violence against the future generations of Palestinians and Israelis who must live as neighbors in peace and security. It is a violence against the environment and against a Christian archeological site. The American veto also is interpreted by many as an act of violence against justice,

giving the Israelis the 'green light' to proceed. Alas, the project will adversely affect the future of millions of people who ultimately must share Jerusalem and its hinterland.

Christians should condemn all violence that deprives future generations of the right to live in peace with justice, including the unrelenting repressive policies of the state. The structural evil of state policies is no less offensive than individual acts of violence.

Action

We call on the government of Israel to abandon its violence against the Palestinian people, its partners in peace, and to consider the grave outcome of its actions. We invite it

- to interpret the biblical injunction which Christians share with Jews, 'love your neighbor as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31) as having an inclusive interpretation, that includes the Palestinians;
- to accept the sharing of Jerusalem as a key to a just peace;
- to terminate the building of settlements, which makes a fetish and idol of the land.

We call on the government of the United States to fulfill its commitment to peace, by injecting the concept of justice into the peace process as its most important ingredient. Without justice for the Palestinians, the peace process is a sham. Unless the outcome of the peace process achieves the withdrawal of Israel from the Occupied Territories (including East Jerusalem) there will not be justice, and without justice, there will not be security. The United States is entrusted with an historic responsibility to create a just peace.

Both Palestinians and Israelis are strangers and sojourners on the land, which belongs to God:
The land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants'
(Leviticus 25:23).

Let us share it under the one creator God who has placed both of our people on it.
Having endured a prolonged Crucifixion, the Palestinians await the dawn of Resurrection.

This statement was issued by Sabeel on Good Friday 1997, just as the destruction at Abu Ghneim had begun. See page 9 for photos and further information.