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GOOD NEWS

CORNWALL STREET LIGHTS SWITCH OFF

More than 3,000 street lights in Cornwall will be turned off during the night between 12 and 5 am to reduce carbon emissions and to save money. This will also encourage nocturnal wild life.

LENT VIGIL

A 10 day climate vigil has been organised for Lent 2024 by Green Christian, Christian Aid, Tearfund, A Rocha, the Salvation Army and Christian Climate Action. From Ash Wednesday, the round-the-clock vigil will take place outside Parliament to lobby for bolder climate initiatives.

THIRTY YEARS OF FAIR TRADE IN SCHOOLS

This year celebrates 30 years of school involvement in Fair Trade. There are 500 Fair Trade schools, including one, St Mary's, in Falmouth.

CAFOD

locally are hosting a special Lent Hunger lunch at S Mary's Church Hall, Falmouth on the Family Fast Day on February 22nd at 12 midday. We are reminded that prayer and fasting are powerful ways to lift our troubled world up to God

PAKISTAN

The study of Islam will no longer be compulsory for non-Muslims in Pakistan's schools. The Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training approved a new curriculum for 2024-2025 which will permit Christians and other minorities to study their own faiths.

FOR PRAYER & REFLECTION

UNHCR reports that last winter was Afghanistan's coldest winter in 15 years. Thousands of livestock froze to death. Families burned animal manure, old tyres and rubbish to keep warm. Now it is winter again, families face a battle for survival. UNHCR is providing survival packs containing mattresses, blankets, warm clothes, and tarpaulins to insulate their shelters from freezing wind, rain and snow which cost £82. 2 million have been displaced by conflict. Winter temperatures can drop to -21 degrees.

HIGHER EDUCATION

20,000 students in part-time higher education are forced to start repaying their student loans while still at university, while full time students don't have to start repaying till after their graduation. Industry experts are calling for a change to this anomaly.

GENDER ABUSE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The abuse rate is 5 times higher in S. Africa than in other comparable countries. To counteract this, a new psychological approach is being pioneered by a native psychologist with containers being used to house facilities for women and children in accessible locations.

SPECIAL REPORT ON VISIT TO WEST BANK:

see below (thanks to Nona for forwarding this)

ACTION FOR THE WEEK

- Ponder this report and offer prayer about it.
- Prayer for King Charles and the Royal family.

Report on visit to West Bank 10th - 22nd January 2024

Background

The visit was at my own initiative, and my own cost. Having lived in Bethlehem and twice served with EAPPI - as well as leading many visits to the Holy Land I felt a compelling desire to be with friends I have known a long time and hear their feelings about the situation now facing Palestinians.

Risk Assessment

I was travelling by myself, into a region where my government advice was not to travel. My travel insurance 'might not be valid.'

Bomb and rocket alerts were still happening occasionally in Jerusalem.

There were real risks about what would happen if I met settlers in my travels, and even encounters with soldiers might well be dangerous.

A considerable risk was of a major escalation of the crisis while in the West Bank. By the nature of such escalations it was impossible to predict what that would mean and what action I would need to take.

To mitigate these risks I took the following measures:

I registered my presence in the country with the British Consulate.

I made sure that I was aware of what to do in the event of an air raid warning including the location of shelters.

I kept abreast of world news in case of a major escalation.

I contacted local people (friends) whom I knew who were present in Jerusalem and the West Bank, both Palestinians and Internationals. I made use of their local knowledge to remain 'under the radar' and away from potential trouble.

I made sure that individuals in the UK and people in Israel/Palestine knew where I was day by day. I used WhatsApp with its internal security to communicate both in the Land and to the UK.

The risk of a major escalation was one that I had no means to mitigate against.

Programme

I flew to Ben Gurion airport and caught the train to Jerusalem, then used the tram to Damascus Gate. I registered at St. George's Guest House, remaining in Jerusalem until Sunday 14th, when I travelled to Bethlehem and stayed at the Bethlehem Hotel. On Wednesday 17th, I travelled to Hebron and stayed at the HIRN centre. While in Hebron I visited the town of Yatta and the village of Umm Ul Khair. I travelled back to Bethlehem on 19th and returned to Jerusalem on 21st. Returning by the same route to Ben Gurion, I flew back to England on a late flight on 22nd.

Fear

Before travelling I was aware that the large number of arrests and detentions in the West Bank made people very nervous of e mails and other forms of social media. I had found that Palestinians who previously had provided me with considerable ongoing knowledge of what was happening, were simply not responding to e mails. I discovered while in the West Bank that part of the reason for not writing was that they felt depressed and writing about what was happening simply made this worse. Part of what I hoped to achieve by visiting was to hear what people were afraid to write. Various incidents while in Palestine made me aware of the validity of these fears. As a result I will not use names in this report, or refer to specific locations, though I am aware that there will be inevitable identification possible. I pay tribute to those I met for their courage.

I had many conversations with shopkeepers, cafe owners, people I met in projects, individuals I have known a long time, dear friends and, in pretty well all of these conversations, people spoke freely only when they were sure that they were not being overheard. While Palestinian hospitality was as generous as ever, it was overlaid by a prudence in regard to the context.

One story illustrates the complexity. On the first Saturday I spent in Jerusalem, I met a man I had never met before. He has recently taken over a senior role in an organisation I have had extensive dealings with. We agreed to meet at the Notre Dame. This is a major Roman Catholic centre just outside the Jerusalem City walls. Usually there is a cafe and a restaurant

there but, with the collapse of tourism, neither of these was open. We met in the lobby. The manager of the facility met us and clearly knew my companion well. When we had been talking for twenty minutes a man, dressed in a manner indicating that he was Jewish, came into the lobby and sat down within earshot. My companion immediately suggested moving to another venue. I will never know if this was an innocent encounter. It is difficult to understand why the Jewish man should have entered a Roman Catholic facility on the Jewish sabbath. There were no public facilities open for him or anyone else to use. He did not speak to anyone.

During my time in the West Bank, I was repeatedly warned about the dangers of travel. One risk was that having arrived at a location roads might be closed and return might be difficult or even impossible. On another level, travel anywhere in area C, outside Palestinian controlled areas might result in encounters with hostile settlers or soldiers. This generates fear. At one stage, a road in Hussan (near Bethlehem) was closed and we had to wait more than three hours for it to open. Even approaching the closure resulted in tear gas being fired at us. When finally the soldiers examined our documents, there was perceptible tension in the vehicle. On a visit to a location close to Massafa Yatta, I was warned that staying very long would endanger both ourselves and the villagers. We were there less than an hour as a result.

Impressions

The West Bank is now splintered into numerous pieces and travel between them is unpredictable and at times dangerous. The three major West Bank towns I visited, Bethlehem, Hebron and Yatta, each only have one entrance for vehicles open and that is guarded by an Israeli Checkpoint. There are other places to walk through as entry to the towns, but this is overseen by soldiers. It is an intimidating experience and makes many ordinary, everyday tasks, difficult. It also means that commerce between West Bank towns is almost at a standstill.

Outside the major towns, there are literally hundreds of road closures so that many Palestinian villages have no vehicle access at

all. In contrast roads to the settlements are flowing freely. I was unable to go to any settlements, but frequently was able to observe traffic on roads serving settlements as flowing freely.

The situation in Bethlehem is especially worrying. I have heard it said on more than one occasion that at least forty Christian families have left since 7th October. The leadership of the Christian community in Bethlehem is deeply concerned that, to an already much weakened Christian Community, this could be the death blow to a viable Christian presence. They are appealing to the churches across the world for help. The economy of Bethlehem is based upon tourism and it was only just beginning to recover from COVID when this new disaster fell upon it. Money is needed, as many Christian families are living without knowing where their next meal is coming from. There is very little support available for them. Many pay rent upon shops and have had no income since 7th October. But the support wanted from the world church is not just financial - they need help in keeping the community together. They need to feel valued by the wider church. At present they feel deserted. There is some anger that the Roman Catholic Church has payed off the people working for them in their pilgrim facilities.

A number of conversations have raised another concern. On the 21st January, while at the Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, one of the ladies in the congregation spoke to me about a raid that had taken place early that morning. A house belonging to a Christian family had been raided by the Israeli Army and a twelve year old boy detained. While such raids are common place, it was the attitude of the soldiers to the family being a Christian family that was alarming people across the Christian community. The soldiers had said "You Christians don't belong here and we're going to clear you out." While the comment was simply one made by an individual soldier, I had previously heard from one of the leaders of the Christian Community in Bethlehem that there was a consciousness in the Christian Community that the Israeli authorities are now targeting the Christians. It is a further reason why church support for Christians in Bethlehem is needed now more than ever.

In villages and small communities in country areas - most of which are in area C, the situation is even worse. It is very difficult to distinguish between settlers and the Israeli Army. Many younger settlers are dressed in army clothing. Reservists have been called up. As a result when settlers enter Palestinian villages they look like army and its impossible to know whether what they are saying and doing comes as a result of army orders or through settler hostility. Settlers have taken it upon themselves to target Palestinian flags and any paintings that have portrayed Palestinian flags. In some cases they have insisted that Israeli flags are flown where Palestinian flags have previously been seen. Palestinians living in more remote houses have been told that unless they fly an Israeli flag they will be attacked. On a visit to a village close to a settlement adjacent to Massafa Yatta I was told that the villagers are now short of food and constantly hungry. Their flocks are not allowed to graze and they have insufficient fodder for them. As a result their yield of milk is down and food for people of the village is insufficient. In addition some of the men used to travel into Israel to work and they are no longer allowed to. They simply have insufficient money for food to live on. Even if they get money, they struggle to bring food or other household objects back to the village. If settlers see them carrying food they attack them. Many of the cars owned by the villagers have been confiscated. It seems that deprivation of food is being used by settlers to encourage families to move out of area C. Settlers have specifically said, in the village referred to above, "You are going to pay the price for what Hamas did on 7th October."

One of my interests for a while now has been the politics of the Palestinians and the question now of "What comes next?" I took the opportunity to ask people who they saw as the person they would like to see replacing Mahmoud Abbas as Palestinian President. One name comes up time and again - that of Marwan Barghouti. One thing that I have heard more than once, and which is worrying, is that, soon after 7th October, he was moved from Ramona Prison, where he was being held, and no-one publicly knows where he is now held.

Many conversations have centred around the word 'depressed'. It seems to cover the feelings of many Palestinians - despair might

be a better word for it - but that is not the word they use. They have faced so much for so long and now they feel that they are facing annihilation. While that may be an over-reaction to what they face today, it does reflect their feelings. They use the word 'genocide' for what Israel is doing in Gaza, but equally feel that their presence in the West Bank is precarious.

John Howard
23rd January 2024.