

SNAPSHOTS FROM PALESTINE

The taxi driver was adamant. He was not driving up to the Israeli tank blocking the main road into Nablus. And certainly not while it was being stoned by Palestinian youths. That was our introduction to the biggest city in the West Bank. Rubble lined the highway and the army checkpoint had meant abandoning our car and finding a taxi.

We had arranged to meet Mohammed in Balata refugee camp, which had endured daily raids by the Israeli military in the weeks following the stunning Hamas election victory. The day before we arrived, two youths had been killed by the Israelis in street confrontations. Our attempts to enter Balata were blocked by a jeep. No entry to anyone, was the curt reply. So we took advice from Mohammed on the mobile, doubled back behind the jeep and crossed fields to enter the camp.

The camp was originally set up by thousands of Palestinians forced from their land in 1948. Subsequent military advances by Israel have swollen their numbers. The 'camp' now has an air of permanency. But today it was quiet. All the shops in the main street were shuttered; there were makeshift barricades manned by kids with hands full of broken breeze blocks. Some had bottles filled with paint. They were waiting.

Then an Israeli jeep swung into view and everyone ran down narrow alleyways. The kids wanted a better vantage point for throwing stones. We just wanted cover. In lulls, they explained how two 17-year-old youths were shot. It's a common occurrence in the camp and other West Bank hotspots as the Israelis attack civilians and militants.

Ghassan, a young activist, explained it like this: "My father says if you want peace, don't poke a stick at a snake." The Israelis, he felt, were hell bent on provoking a violent reaction by their attacks. Another suicide bombing would allow Israel to portray itself as a victim rather than an aggressor and derail attempts to build peace after the election of Hamas. The last thing Israel seems to want is peaceful dialogue with people willing to put away their guns.

The troops in the jeeps, young conscripts frightened to venture out on foot, were bombarded with breeze blocks and paint bombs. One had dented the bonnet while the heavily meshed windscreen was plastered with paint. The hollow thud of another tear-gas canister forced people from the barricades. We moved away but still our eyes were stinging from its effects. Paramedics went to a house to rescue an elderly woman suffering the effects more than most. She was escorted out of the camp. The jeeps swept through the camp remorselessly and we finally accepted we wouldn't find Mohammed in the maze of battered buildings. Everywhere we went there were posters and memorials to martyrs of the intifada. Young faces were stencilled on walls; posters and election banners coloured the drab streets. The day after we left Balata, a further five people were killed by the Israelis.

Palestinians across the West Bank feel they are living in an open prison. A 30-foot wall is being built to separate Israel from Palestine. It also separates Palestinians from each other, from their fields and olive groves. Short

journeys are now impossible without the right number plates (green for Israelis, yellow for Palestinians).



A watchtower guards the wall near Jerusalem

In Bethlehem, a town dependent upon tourism, large security gates now dominate the main entrance. Samer explains how the security checks have all but destroyed the tourism industry. He says it's a deliberate policy by the Israelis to wreck the fragile Palestinian economy. His home - an apartment built in traditional Palestinian style on top of his father's home - overlooks a steep gorge and he lifts the blinds to show us the tidy new settlement across the valley. From there two years ago, Samer says, the settlers started shooting at his home. One of his four young daughters was there at the time but luckily wasn't hit. The family was determined not to abandon the home. The adjoining neighbourhood had done that and settlers had moved in straight away. While the crisis was at its height, Samer would sneak back at night to flick the lights on. He still lives there but also knows the settlers want his home, his neighbourhood.

Palestinian politics is in a state of flux at the moment. The success of Hamas in January's elections has brought fierce denunciations from Israel about 'dealing with terrorists', obviously forgetting that at one time they also denounced Arafat as a terrorist (and that many Israeli prime ministers were once terrorists on the British 'wanted' list).

The Wall keeps going up, making it more and more difficult to exist as a Palestinian. But the spirit of the Palestinian people has not been broken; resistance is visible everywhere, from the stone-throwing youths of Balata camp to the election victory of Hamas.

FROM BANGOR TO BETHLEHEM

A young Welsh peace activist, Gwilym Morus, originally from Wrexham but now living in Bangor, has recorded a CD with Palestinian musicians to raise money for them. ***Alternative Information From Bethlehem to Bangor*** is a combination of Welsh harmonies and Arabic rhythms. Gwilym hopes to bring two Palestinian artists over to Wales to perform and record in the summer. To order a copy, send your name and address, together with a cheque for £5 payable to **Gwybodaeth Amgem** to: Gwilym Morus, 154 Stryd Fawr, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 1NU.