

Between the Palestinian village of Yassuf and
the Jewish settlement of Tappuah
Armed & violent settlers threaten International Monitors



Picture taken by Lee Onyszchuk on October 16, 2002

Lee took part in the most successful non-violent direct action in the Olive Harvest Campaign so far. In the article below when mention is made of the "13 ISM people," Lee and Dan Swan from Calgary are in that bunch. This is an incident that I hope gets some media coverage both here and in Palestine. I am a firm believer that only non-violent protest action will advance the cause of freedom for the Palestinians.

5-Major Confrontation with Israeli Settlers—Nonviolence Prevails - 10/16 and 10/17, 2002 - Yasuf, West Bank

Four local Boston-area people-Karen, John, Phil, and Susan-are part of a 13-person ISM group in Yasuf (Salfit district, north of Ramallah). Additional Boston-area delegates are about to join the campaign. The following report - for BostontoPalestine - was composed after phone calls.

Wednesday, 10/16/02 Testing the Waters - Yasuf village, West Bank

This morning, villagers from Yasuf and 13 internationals from the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) walked to the olive orchards located near the Israeli settlement, TapHuac. On the way to the olive orchards we heard gunshots, and soon people were running toward us, warning us that the settlers were shooting-from a nearby hilltop. We internationals headed toward the gunshots and made visual contact with a handful of settlers. They stood on the hill above us with their machine guns, shooting over the heads of the Palestinians harvesting in the fields. We tried to speak to them, saying, "We are here in peace." They said, "We are here in peace too," then threw rocks at us and fired shots over our heads. The military and the police arrived and detained (arrested?) a settler who, in full view of the soldiers, had fired his rifle and hit a rock about twenty feet away from us. The Palestinians were nearby, yelling to the soldiers that they needed to harvest their olives. The soldiers said they were leaving but that they were declaring this a closed military zone and that the police would arrive soon to arrest us. We were quietly sitting in a line. One of us tried to negotiate with the soldiers, to no avail. The military then forced the villagers to leave, actively pushing many of them. We held our ground, then finally decided to leave for the day. In the evening we met with the villagers and talked about what to do next. They told us that nothing had worked, so far. The village is surrounded by settlements that take more of its land each year. The villagers are prevented from harvesting, but if the villagers don't harvest the orchards, the land is ruled "unused" and is confiscated by the settlers. We began talking about how we could return to the fields tomorrow, for a major harvest action. The feeling of solidarity was powerful, with peasants (in modern and traditional dress), young and old trading ideas with the internationals and Israeli peace activists. The villagers were risking a lot, but they were willing to take a chance and follow our recommendation to do a direct action. This was to be a totally nonviolent action-no stone throwing, and completely peaceful and silent. We told the Palestinian villagers we were willing to risk injury or arrest if they thought this would help. But the villagers told us, "We won't let you do this alone, and we will be with you even if it comes to beatings and arrests." This is a huge risk for them. For most of us, we had never in our lives seen anything quite like this.

Thursday, 10/17/02 Action and Victory It was time to proceed with this well-planned major harvest action. The participants included: about 400 Palestinians from the village; 16 internationals-13 ISMs and 3 women from IWPS (the International Women's Peace Service); plus 8 Israeli activists (some of them from Rabbis for Human Rights). The plan was for this large number of villagers to carry out major harvesting work today—to be shielded from the settlers by the internationals and the Israeli peace activists. The settlers had been raiding the olive groves, preventing the Palestinians from getting to their fields and groves, and annexing more and more Palestinian land to their settlement.

We awoke at about 6 A.M. and met the villagers at the roadblock leading to their fields. There were about 400 villagers. There was enormous anticipation in the air-it had a been a long time since they had been able to visit these fields, because of the great danger. The villagers started to separate, going down the slopes to their family plots. We had planned to stay together for safety reasons, but the Palestinians moved ahead in this manner because they felt that this might be their

last chance to visit their land. We soon found out that we were encountering bands of armed settlers-total 16. And there was NO sign of any soldiers or police officers- no protection whatsoever. The planners of today's action had received direct assurances that there would be formal Israeli protection for this harvesting today. The assurances had been given by the local Israeli civil administration and by the commanding officer of the local IOF.

The group felt that we had been set up. The American Consulate in Jerusalem was immediately contacted, but it took them almost an hour before they made a substantial reply-saying that they had finally made calls to Israeli officials in the area. (Presumably they made such calls.) The settlers were firing shots from different directions. We could see them firing their guns, running toward the Palestinians. They looked like an army-heavily armed with machine guns, pistols, and large knives, and carrying walkie-talkies. The internationals and Israeli peace activists descended quickly onto the scene and confronted the settlers. The settlers were firing shots over peoples' heads, pointing their guns at villagers and internationals, hurling large pieces of rock-sometimes from only a few feet away. They were screaming at the Palestinians, pushing them, and generally terrorizing them. Some of them were pointing their guns at us, pushing us, shouting threats, like "I will kill you." (They seemed more angry at the Israeli activists than the internationals.)

We immediately began trying to shadow the settlers, following them wherever they went. We were trying to put two of us on each settler, but in some situations the settlers outnumbered us. And there was the additional problem of the Palestinians being already spread out. But we did have some success in diverting the attention of the settlers in their attempts to attack the Palestinians.

While all of this was happening, we noticed two Israeli soldiers standing a distance away, watching, doing nothing. Three soldiers finally arrived on the scene-a grossly inadequate number. They began telling the internationals to leave.

There was, of course, no reasoning with the settlers. We reminded them that none of us was armed, and that we were here to harvest olives. But the settlers continued to shout things like, "You came with the murderous Arabs to our settlement to kill us." One of them taunted us, saying, "Don't touch me, don't touch my gun-if you do, I'll kill you. Come on, touch my gun, touch my gun!" Their language was, of course, foul-"bitch!," "faggot!" "Fuck you," "Fuck your country!" etc. Other quotes were noteworthy. One of us said to them, "The whole world is watching you." The reply was: "The whole world hates us because they are anti-Semites, and these Jews that are with you here-they are anti-Semites!"

About fifteen minutes later a dozen more soldiers arrived. Some shook hands with settlers, gave them hugs and hi-fives, and joked with them. When the settlers would be firing their guns, the soldiers would say "Hey, hey, you can't do that," not exactly seriously.

At one point a settler was aiming his gun at a crowd of Palestinians. One of us shouted to one of the soldiers, "Arrest him!" The soldier replied, "He is allowed to aim his gun at others as long as he does not shoot." The soldier did nothing. So an elderly Israeli peace activist moved in front of the settler's gun. Every time a settler pointed his gun at someone, this seventy year old man would stand in front of it, with the barrel pointed at his chest.

Actually, we did see one soldier put himself squarely between a settler's gun barrel and a villager.

Later, other soldiers arrived. The villagers were beginning to carry out the plan. They sat down, silently-their message: "We are absolutely in control and unafraid." The Israeli commander told us

that this was a closed military zone and that we had to leave. We argued that it was not. The soldiers seemed stumped. They knew we were right. So they finally asked the settlers to leave. Some of our group told the military that they couldn't expect the settlers to just wander away—they would have to move them away. The soldiers finally did move the enraged settlers up the hill, and away.

The Palestinians were finally able to carry out their harvesting work. They were ecstatic. The olive harvest went on all day long. People were incredibly happy. There was a feeling of victory. Hundreds of olive trees were harvested, and the Palestinians seemed to feel very empowered by this.

Later we gathered together at the village. The villagers, internationals, and Israeli activists took time to acknowledge everyone's courage. The villagers said, "Even if we were only able to pick one olive, and no one was hurt, it would have been a victory. But to harvest from hundreds of trees—this was incredible." The experience today represents a victory. But, of course, there is still no real assurance that the Israeli authorities and military can be expected to provide ongoing adequate protection for Palestinians. (These particular settlers happen to be the fanatic rightwing-ideology variety, but such behavior and policy is the rule all over Palestine.)

This village, with its population of 1700 people, has had no success whatsoever in resisting the violence of the settlers and stopping the annexation of their land. This is the first thing that has worked for them. The word is already spreading.

An added note. Today was the 7th anniversary of Rabin's assassination. It's a joyous holiday for many of the settlers. This report is from the Boston-area delegation to the International Solidarity Movement's Olive Harvest Campaign. One hundred Internationals are arriving now in the rural West Bank, to accompany Palestinians defying settlers and military curfews to harvest olives, the lifeblood of Palestine's rural economy and symbol of traditional Palestinian life. The presence of Internationals reduces the threat of violence from settlers and the military, and assists the Palestinians in their resistance to Israeli land-theft and occupation.

