



MEND UK

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What we're up to ...

On March 13th, MEND joined Dr. Martin Luther King III, at the Everest Hotel, Beit Jala, Bethlehem. Over thirty young people, most visitors from the US and UK, participated. Dr. King acknowledged the impossibility of anticipating reactions when people are put into difficult situations, but remained optimistic, stating that it needs only a few men and women to initiate positive change in a community. Lucy Nusseibeh was invited to speak about Palestinian nonviolence and MEND's activities.

New volunteers: In March we were joined by Christopher (from Germany) and Roxanne (from Canada), Hanan and Rawan (from Palestine). In the next few months, we will receive volunteers from the USA, the Netherlands and Japan.

Curriculum launch: On March 31st, in Ramallah, MEND launched the book "Rights First..." It is the final event in the Curriculum project, which aims to influence Palestinian school curriculum by emphasising values such as Human Rights and Nonviolence. Over 60 people from across Palestine attended the launch, including teachers, youth, foreign government representatives, community activists, UN organizations, and the PA's Ministry of Education.

DVC project: On March 19th, MEND East Jerusalem, and ANN Gaza held the first Videoconference. Although the ANN Gaza volunteers have been working with MEND for over two years, this was the first time they saw see each other, literally, face to face! A Skype conference followed on March 26th. We hope these opportunities are a sign of strengthened communication, so that ANN will develop as a Pan-Palestinian network.

What Nonviolence means to me... Interview with Sima Onbos, from the Tul Karem Refugee camp

The interview was conducted in Sima's House on April 6th 2008, by Takanobu Nakahara, , and Roxanne Tremblay, ,with the assistance of Nour Shehadeh.

Like elsewhere in the occupied territories, in the Tul Karem refugee camp, many precious lives had been lost because of violence. This has an unfortunate trickle effect, as a wave of economic suffering, psychological trauma and emotional hatred will crash over all those who are close to the 'martyrs', most notably their large families. Sima Onbos's case is one of these sad cases. It was 2am on February 13th 2004, when Sima Onbos, a mother of four children, the youngest just 18 months, was arrested by the Israeli Defence Forces, and sent to jail in Telmond (about 15km from Tul Karem). Sima spent about two and a half years in jail - until June 2006. She was alleged to have 'helped' the armed resistance, which she denied during the interview. Having said this, before being jailed, she believed Palestinians had to resist the occupation by all means. She also did not know or recognise the word *la-anf* ('Nonviolence') when she was jailed.

Listening to her experience in the prison was difficult for the interviewer. The room, a small cockroach ridden windowless cell, was located underground. The humidity in the room was very high. Food was reportedly not hygienically prepared, and medicine was very basic. The way prison guards treated prisoners was also very bad. In her words, they treated prisoners 'as if they are animals' – although as she said, the question of who was being dehumanized by this attitude was debateable – was it the prisoner or could it also be the guard? After she was released from jail, Nour, her friend, visited her occasionally. One day in March 2007, Nour used the word 'la-anf' and she became interested in the concept. Since then, she has been working actively on resistance, in a nonviolent way. In addition to going to the demonstrations against the Wall and checkpoints, she also attends meetings with Israeli women who are soldiers in the 'Combatants for Peace' movement. After the experience of perceiving Israelis as soldiers who demolished Palestinians' houses, and killed Palestinian children, women and men, including members of her own family, she said she was happy to meet some Israelis who were different to these.

In answer to the last question in the interview, which was "What does Nonviolence means to you?", she framed the answer like this: "the only road leading to the peace". Sima said she believes violence begets more violence, and only Nonviolence can make peace between the two people. It is a long road, and I sensed the difficulty she was clearly experiencing during the interview, when she observed Jews as a people who do not always keep their promises but work to exacerbate a poor situation. Regardless of this sensitivity based on her lifetime experience, including the murder of some of the people closest to her, and her period of imprisonment which left her young children motherless and homeless, she still believes Nonviolence is the only road to peace – like many others in MEND and other organizations working for Nonviolent resistance, and walking the Nonviolent path.

Abdullah Abu Rahme: A Palestinian Gandhi? Excerpts from an interview by Taka, MEND Resource Development Officer.

In 1987, at the start of the First Intifada, Abudullah Abu Rahme was 16 years old. He saw this as the successful attempt of continuous Nonviolent Resistance under national unity, at least for the first 6 months. While studying at Bir Zeit University, he took part in road blocks, so that Israeli military convoys could not pass. He did so because he did not like violence. He did not want the cars to go through, because they would go to kill someone. It was not hatred against enemy, but rather love and respect for all life – that necessitated him to take the action. Twenty years later, he is a father, works in a high school near Bir Zeit and also part-time at Al Quds Open University. What distinguishes him from other teachers is his role as a Coordinator of the now world-famous Bil'in Popular Committee.

His strong conviction is respect for all people. He explicitly says, “We are not against Jews”. In his house, of which the first floor has been turned into an “International House”, many people from many different countries come to eat, sleep and struggle. His guests includes people from America, France, Germany, Britain, Scotland, Japan, Denmark, Spain, Basque, Morocco, Iceland, Belgium, Greece... and, the biggest group: Israelis.

Now Bil'in is a name that most people who either believe in Nonviolence or Palestinian cause appreciate, especially after Israeli Supreme Court ruled to re-route the Separation fence. The Wall has denied villagers access to 2,300 donums of their land (about 58% of village's original land) and resulted in de-facto annexation of the land for Israeli settlers.

When the villagers started demonstrating they were not sure how to attract media coverage. So in May 2005, they began tying themselves to olive trees. The message was: "If you want to up-root this tree, you have to kill us". Abdullah Abu Rahme recalls how these creative acts surprised, and perhaps panicked, journalists. “What? What is happening in Bil'in???” – this was their first thought. Since then, TV stations, radio reporters, internationals, and even more Israelis have come ... and the Bil'in legend began.

Thanks to the effort of the thousands of Palestinians, Israelis, and Internationals who participated, many of whom have been injured and arrested, in September 2007 the Court ordered the Government to re-route the Wall. In the ruling, 1,100 donums of the land is to be given back to the villagers, which Abudallah regards as satisfactory result –especially given the fact that no one has been killed, so far. The court decision, if successfully implemented, will be one of the most convincing examples of premise that “Nonviolence works” in a decade, even a century. Members of Bil'in Popular Committee are determined to spread this miraculous success to all over Palestine.

In Abdullah Abu Rahme's role in the relentless struggle, many people see the arrival of a Nonviolent icon. Some journalists even called him the “Palestinian Gandhi”. Whether or not it is a good idea to dramatize one individual aside from the others, who are all struggling together or separately; it is probably fair to say that his role in what this rather small village has accomplished makes him deserving of the name.

He believes in Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and others who liberated themselves through Nonviolent methods. They give him courage and confidence for what he is doing now. And, there is no question, I believe, that for people of all languages, nationalities, and religions who believe in Freedom and Justice in the land of Palestine and all over the world, now it is Abudallah Abu Rahme of Bil'in Popular Committee who is giving courage and confidence in what they are doing.

MEND UK Debate: “Palestine/Israel: Different Voices, which Road to Peace ?”

By Nouna and Giorgio, Queen Mary's University of London.

As volunteers for MEND, we work to raise awareness of MEND's activities, projects and causes in Palestine, so we decided to organise a debate between experts tackling issues of conflict-resolution and regulation as they pertain specifically to the situation in Palestine. It is important in any such debate to obtain a balanced spread of views, and as such we invited speakers from a variety of professional and ideological backgrounds. Dr Stephanie Khoury, previous legal advisor to the PLO, gave a perspective on human rights and international law, both of which are necessary to reach a durable conflict resolution in Palestine and Israel, but are sadly systematically violated, creating a serious obstacle to peace. Dr Brendan O'Duffy is a specialist in conflict resolution, specifically in Northern Ireland, and compared this conflict to that between Palestine and Israel, attempting to draw lessons from a more successful case of conflict resolution. His main argument was for a step by step approach that includes and dialogues with all parties, even the more extreme ones, which results in a more manageable process, and allows for the realisation of the basic necessities for peace which were mentioned by Stephanie Khoury: The respect for human rights and international law. MP Louise Ellman gave a politician's perspective on the issue, and suggested that the lessons of past attempts to deal with the process should be learned, especially with regards to the Oslo Accords. Dr Oren Ben-Dor, coming from a background in legal philosophy, radically challenged the foundations of the debate, arguing that since Israel was created as a state for Jews, there can never truly be what he defined 'justice', for Israelis or Palestinians. The debate saw a very good attendance of just under a hundred people in the Mason Lecture Theatre on the Queen Mary University campus. There was also a great deal of interest after the speakers had voiced their views, with questions and comments. The atmosphere throughout was enthusiastic, professional, and occasionally passionate!



Abudallah Abu Rahme
Photo by Mitsushi Ikeda