In the hazy light from a vantage point north of Bethlehem we witnessed the scale of the Israeli’s illegal settlement programme.
Leaving Dublin on Friday afternoon (24 September) and posing as pilgrims, we travelled to Amsterdam, then on to Ben Gurion Airport, Tel Aviv, arriving in the early hours of Saturday. The airport is of course built literally on top of Palestinian villages cleansed in the Nakba. The visitor is “welcomed” by a series of giant propaganda posters by the Keren Hayesod Foundation. The Foundation was established in London in 1920 to finance the “Jewish Zionist Settlement Movement” and the creation of a “National Home” in Israel for the Jewish “Race”. Its founders included Baron de Rothschild, Vladimir Jabotinsky and Chaim Weizmann who was to become the first President of Israel. There amongst the posters was one depicting the main Zionist myth – “After 2,450 years – Jews Once Again Left the Captivity of the Diaspora and Returned to Their Homeland.”

Saturday - Bethlehem
We transferred by coach to Bethlehem in early morning, caught a few hours sleep at the hotel and then set off to explore the old town. In a couple of minutes I was in the middle of street scenes that haven’t changed much in hundreds of years. Exotic herbs and spices, cloth, live chickens, rabbits and all sorts of goods and souvenirs were being traded in the souk (market). I made my way along cobbled streets, to Manger Square to see the Church of the Nativity, believed to mark the birthplace of Christ. Nearby is the Mosque. In the square, Arabic music played in accompaniment to a procession of women dressed in black, carrying photographs of their martyred sons and husbands.

Meeting With PGFTU
In the afternoon we met with a representative of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU). We learned of the fragility of the local economy and the difficulties in organising workers, when almost the only work on offer was in building the Separation Wall and in the illegal settlements.
Settlements North Of Bethlehem

From the PGFTU Office, we went with Dr. Mazin Qumsiyeh, on a guided tour of the illegal settlements north of Bethlehem in Beit Sahour and surrounding districts. The opening image on page 7 gives some indication of the scale of the settlements, each of which has a “pre-booked” population from Russia, the US and other countries. Each settlement is then “protected” by the Separation Wall – taller than the Berlin Wall and yet less criticised in the West.

Dr. Qumsiyeh told us about the vice-like grip Israel has on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, effectively controlling Electricity, Water and Telecoms supply through their control of all goods and spare parts in and out of the territory and by the imposition of crippling import/export duties.

We learned of the popular resistance in December 2000, against the Israeli military occupation of Beit Sahour to make way for the settlers. This active resistance from Arab, Israeli and international activists, led to the creation of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), who later played a role in smuggling themselves into the Church of the Nativity and defending it from threatened shelling by an Israeli army commander. The Palestinians, Dr. Qumsiyeh told us, were committed to a course of “samoud”, a non-violent form of resistance which translates as “persistence, resistance, resilience.”

In Manger Square, I encountered a procession of women carrying photographs of their martyred sons and husbands.

Trade Union members of the delegation meet with the PGFTU representative in Bethlehem and learn that many Palestinians can only find work in building the illegal settlements and the Separation Wall.

Dr. Qumsiyeh, took us to the hills above Bethlehem, where we could view for ourselves the extent of the illegal Israeli settlement building.
On Sunday morning we set off for Hebron to meet the volunteers involved in the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) (www.eappi.org). They are part of a programme by the World Council of Churches to accompany Palestinian children to school, where they are vulnerable to attack by Jewish Settlers and to accompany adults through Israeli checkpoints to ensure they get to work or to receive medical treatment etc… unmolested. The various EAPPI volunteers we encountered during the week were quite the most impressive and inspiring young people I have ever met. We walked through the old town of Hebron towards the market and on to the Qurtoba School. Going through the old market we observed all kinds of rubbish on the wire-mesh roof over the narrow alley ways of the ancient souk. It was immediately apparent that it had been thrown there by the Jewish settlers living in apartments above. Hebron had been divided into two areas in 1994, with 40,000 Palestinians living in the Israeli controlled H2 area, living under curfews and arbitrary restrictions on movement. In contrast, there were 500 illegal settlers in the middle of Hebron, the second largest city in the West Bank, whose “free movement was protected” by 2000 Israeli troops.

The Qurtoba school is accessed through an Israeli checkpoint at the end of a street that had been cleansed of its Palestinian traders and residents. In a perverse twist of history, both the Star of David and the Menorah, had been painted on empty shop doors to confirm the cleansing was complete. At the primary school we met wonderfully cheery and bright children. The educational achievement of Palestinian children is impressive on any measure and is in itself a form of resistance to the occupation. As we left the school, the Muezzin called the Muslim faithful to prayer. Within seconds, in a sickening response - the Jewish settlers began drowning it out with a cacophony of their own sounds. The settlers in Hebron are amongst the most aggressive, and harrowing scenes of their attacks on the children we met are recorded in a documentary which can be viewed at www.israelvisisrael.com.
An Israeli soldier keeps an eye on us as we move through the market in Hebron.
The Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH) was established on foot of the condemnation of the UN Security Council for the massacre of 29 worshipers at the Ibrahimi Mosque/Cave of Machpela on 25 February 1994 by Baruch Goldstein a settler fanatic. Subsequent agreement was reached between the PLO and Israel that six countries would provide volunteers for the mission - Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, Italy and Turkey. (www.tiph.org)

In his eulogy at the funeral of Baruch Goldstein, who was killed by surviving worshippers, Rabbi Ya’acov Perin declared - “One million Arabs are not worth a single Jewish fingernail.” (New York Times 28 February 1994). After the slaughter the Israelis permanently closed off several streets and cleared them of all Palestinian residents, to keep the settlers safe from any backlash.

It was emotionally overwhelming to see the circumstances of these children under brutal occupation and to feel so powerless. I momentarily put myself in the mind of one of their fathers and struggled to compose myself.

**Attwani**

After lunch we travelled to Attwani, in south Hebron to see a Palestinian village, being slowly enveloped by settlements and by an “outpost” which is illegal even in Israeli law. Again there were two volunteers from the Christian

Peacemaker teams accompanying the children to school and the village shepherds herding their goats around the surrounding hills, as they have done for hundreds of years. It was particularly humbling to witness the courage and fortitude of these young people, living in primitive conditions among the villagers, in the knowledge that they could be attacked in the manner of their colleague Joel Gulledge, who was badly injured after a settler attack in July 2008. In a pattern repeated across the West Bank, the village has no running water or sewerage facilities, whilst the new settlement is fully “serviced”. We were to learn later that the cistern installed by Oxfam to gather water for the village was destroyed by the Israelis in 2009.

**Monday - Jerusalem**

A busy day of political meetings with: the Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem (www.arij.org); the Alternative Information Centre (AIC) (www.alternativenews.org) and the Coalition of
Women for Peace, held in the offices of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (www.ichad.org). So much information to take in, but significantly we learned; The Oslo Accords in 1995, introduced the “interim” division of the West Bank into three administrative areas. Area A, under full control of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA); Area B, under Palestinian civil control and Israeli security control, encompassing most rural villages; and Area C, which constitutes approximately 60% of the West Bank is under complete Israeli control for both security and civil administration and consisting of most of the agricultural and grazing land in the West Bank.

Significantly too, it contains the main aquifer for the region.

Predictably, there has not been the gradual transfer of power promised in the “interim” arrangements and 97% of the Palestinian population remains densely corralled in 70 enclaves within Areas A and B whilst Area C contains 121 illegal settlements with a population of approximately 290,697. See (www.btselem.org/English/Settlements/). Area C constitutes the only contiguous territory in the West Bank, with settlements strategically connected by settler-only roads. Areas A and B, are a series of Bantustans, divided by the Separation Wall, which controls the movement of Palestinians and leaves them utterly dependent on the “goodwill” of the occupying powers.

Last, but certainly not least, we met Aliyah Strauss, from the Coalition of Women for Peace. Along with Machsom Watch, the Coalition provides volunteers to attend the Israeli checkpoints, in groups of two, twice a day. They report to the Israeli authorities and populate a website dedicated to sharing information on the impediments to Palestinians getting to work or receiving medical treatment. Their watch starts in early morning as the Israeli checkpoints are unpredictable and it can take hours to pass through to get to work. Aliyah, who is in her 80’s was apologetic that she couldn’t get out to do as much as she used to!
The Separation Wall often prevents farmers getting to their olive groves and a deliberately perverse system allows the Israeli authorities to grant permits, not necessarily to the actual farmer, but to their spouses or children. They alone can then pass through the “agricultural gates”, otherwise a huge round trip can be required. Coalition volunteers visit the villages every two weeks or so and report back on any problems.

Another of the Coalition’s constituents - the Israeli section of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, examine and expose the militarisation of Israeli culture through their educational work.

One of the most significant outcomes of the women’s work, has been the creation of the website “Who Profits From the Occupation” (www.whoprofits.org), which arose from painstaking work by Israeli women who drove around the settlements gathering hard intelligence on the companies represented there and the banks providing mortgages etc. Among the companies complicit in the occupation is the Irish company - Cement Roadstone Holdings (CRH) who help to build the Separation Wall.

Interestingly, there is another project to challenge the presumption that all Ukrainian and Russian immigrants are right wing extremists like Avigdor Leiberman. It is funded by Rosa Luxemburg’s family.

Ironically Aliyah’s father was an ardent Zionist and her name is Hebrew, meaning “to go up to a Holy place” or especially “to go to live in the Holy Land”. Brought to Palestine from the USA she had in time enrolled in the Zionist Youth Organisation. Their motto was “to a people without a land - a land without a people”. She’d had an idyllic early life on a Kibbutz and didn’t meet any Arabs until 1967, when...
they came to work on her family farm. At which point she learned that some of them were from a village that the Kibbutz had replaced. Our coach brought us back the short distance to Bethlehem, passing by expansive parks and prosperous suburbs, to return through the checkpoint, to our own “gated community”, behind the Wall.

Water: A Weapon In The Occupation
Before dinner we squeezed in a talk about Water from George Rishawi from the Near East Council of Churches. Don’t think us dull. Water is a key issue in the region and needless to say, Israel controls almost all of it.

The facts:

i) An Israeli uses four times more water than a Palestinian, a Settler, six times more;
ii) the tankered water which has to be used, has caused hundreds of cases of amoebic diarrhoea and 40% of a Palestinian’s income can go on purchasing water in the summer months;
iii) in Gaza the salinity of the water has caused widespread kidney stones and “blue baby syndrome” where a narrowing of the veins causes oxygen deprivation. And yet Gaza is still denied a treatment plant;
iv) the Israeli Water company closes off supply to Palestinian areas when “necessary” to protect supply for the Israelis.
v) the water supply available for Palestinians even breaches the International standards expected for disaster zones.
vii) leakage rates in Bethlehem are at 45%, with a network that hasn’t been upgraded since 1948; and
viii) USAid has funded a project to dig a deep well using a Jordanian Drilling machine in Hebron. But the Israeli military have declared that the rig is “a danger to aircraft” and so at a daily cost of $52,000, it lies dormant.

Tuesday – Ramallah
Off early to Ramallah and a meeting with Sam Bahour a Palestinian/American businessman. Born in Ohio in 1964 to a Palestinian father and a Lebanese/American mother, Sam graduated from Youngston State University in 1989 in computer technology, worked for a while in the US at senior levels in IT and then came “home” to Palestine in 1994.

Taybeh
He was a most articulate advocate, and has dedicated his efforts to building an independent, sustainable Palestinian private economy. Check his website www.epalestine.com for insightful comment and news.

Taybeh, Oh yes, and it has a Brewery!
And then it was off to Taybeh - 14 km north east of Ramallah. One of the most ancient places in Palestine, dating back to the Bronze Age, Taybeh overlooks the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea. It is mentioned in the Old Testament as Ofra. It is Ephraim, the village in which Jesus chose to stay with His disciples before His Passion (John 11.54). Oh yes, and it has a Brewery! It even has an Oktoberfest! The village is largely Greek Orthodox and the Mayor welcoming the visitors for the 15th Annual United Taybeh American Association visit in July 2010, stated “Truly you have reflected the Light of Christ with your presence….Your visit will not only boost our morale and our spirit but also it will boost our weak economy and encourage us to stay as steadfast witnesses in this very sacred land made holy by Christ Himself. Although now your visit finds us behind the wall and under occupation, we keep the faith that one day, Palestine will be free and we have our basic human rights like the rest of the world.”

We couldn’t claim any great piety, but we did resolve to do our utmost to boost the “weak economy” whilst we were there and indeed to find pubs to host the splendid Taybeh beers in Ireland.

Bil’in Village
From Taybeh to Bil’in village, 17 kms from Ramallah. Bil’in village is in the front line of resistance to the progress of the Separation Wall and its people have suffered grievously.
We had lunch and were briefed by the Popular Committee Against the Wall, on the weekly protests and the legal challenges made against the course of the Wall which had destroyed many acres of Olive Groves. An Israeli court had ruled that the Wall should at least be moved back 500 yards. The Israeli military simply built a barbed wire fence 500 yards in front of its new course. A deadly game of cat and mouse is played each week in the protests after Friday prayers. We were shown footage of Bassem Abu Rahmah who was murdered at point-blank range by a grenade fired at his stomach in a protest last year. (www.bilin-village.org). We went to view the fence and were “checked out” by the Israeli soldiers, who were less than welcoming.

Meeting with Hasbara Students
We left Bil'in for Jerusalem and a meeting with Jewish students from the USA enrolled in the Hasbara programme. “Hasbara” is defined as “public information” but you would commonly understand it as “propaganda”. Essentially Yitzak, their tutor was teaching them the Jesuitical skills required to justify Israel’s outrageous behaviour. He was in the Mark Regev mode of misdirection and deflection, for example - “accepting that Israel wasn’t perfect - but which country is”? As a result it was the verbal equivalent of trying to herd cats. The Hasbara group, the Israel Project even have a Global Language Dictionary 2009, advising on the recommended phrases to be adopted for propaganda use. It was produced by the right-wing U.S. Republican pollster Dr Frank Luntz. In the preface to the publication, which is Not for publication or distribution (but which the New York Times discovered), Frank Luntz concludes – “And remember, it’s not what you say that counts. It’s what people hear.” Indeed.

Wednesday – Nablus
We set off to Nablus (Neopolis in Roman times) through some striking desert scenery, passing ancient villages, the Christian ones identifiable by the church steeples and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) flags.

On the way into the city we visited Jacob’s Well, a Greek Orthodox church marking the site of the Well mentioned in the New Testament, Book of John, in a village then called Sychar. The church is spectacular with exquisite
iconography. I noticed it had a tomb for a martyr – Archimandrite Philoumenos Hasapis. I asked which century he had been martyred in. “This one” was the short answer. He had been murdered with an axe on 16 November 1979 by Zionist settlers who wanted to cleanse the area of any trace of Christianity. Murdered whilst performing vespers, his eyes were plucked out and three of his fingers were cut off – the ones with which he made the sign of the Cross. The attacker was believed to be an American. He was not arrested but merely deported back to America. (www.orthodoxwiki.org)

From Jacob’s Well we went the short distance to Al Najah University, a striking piece of Islamic architecture, made of white quarried stone and thankfully designed to have areas of natural shade from the intense sun. The various faculty buildings in the University are sponsored by other Arab states and the whole enterprise has a great sense of confidence and permanence. Of course Israel has attempted to interfere with the students learning and the university had been closed during the second Intifada and at other points. The students and their lecturers simply met clandestinely in various houses and apartments to continue their studies, a bit like the Hedge schools of our own history. These are people with an indomitable spirit. We had the great pleasure of having our falafel and chips (there were other choices) with the students in their canteen and much craic was had. Not least when one of our party produced a picture on his mobile phone of himself with “Seamus” – an Irish born cage fighter the male students had admired and asked him about!

Balata Unrwa Refugee Camp
From the University we went to the Balata refugee camp. We arrived just as the children were getting out of one of the UN schools, which was a real pleasure as they were a riot of colour and high spirits. At a meeting in the camp we were told candidly about the problems which arise from people living cheek by jowl. The Israelis will not grant permits for any natural expansion so the camp has to be extended upwards. The alleys between the houses are now so tall and narrow that the sunlight doesn’t reach the ground or the children playing below.
A ray of hope in the midst of the harsh reality of Balata refugee camp, a little girl leaving the UN School.
Having been founded in 1950 as a few rows of tents, the camp is now the most densely populated place on Earth with nearly 25,000 people living in an area of less than 1 square kilometre. Families have little privacy or room for intimacy and domestic quarrels were frequent and could spread from one family unit to another. Boys with energy to burn would bully other boys and fights would often get out of hand. There was high unemployment and a sense of emasculation, especially for the males. The committee running the camp had recognised these problems and had set about finding solutions. Women were engaged in productive activity, such as handicrafts etc to raise funds and sustain family income. Children and adults, were enrolled in drama activities, judo classes, music and literacy programmes and other activities.

A Spanish solidarity group had taken a group of children to Spain where for the first time in their lives they would see the sea.

It has often been said that children only know the life they know and that thankfully protects them from greater expectations and despair. These children however have access to the internet, Facebook etc. and know well what sort of lives children should expect to live. Little wonder then that so many young men are commemorated in shrines and photographs in every corner of the camp, having been martyred in their resistance to the occupation. Balata camp was the seat of the first Intifada and the first camp to experience Israeli night raids and the IDF tactic of progressing through the camp by punching through walls in each house to reach their “target”. The Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade was formed here. The cycle of oppression and resistance is well established.

**Meeting with PGFTU-Nablus**

We left the camp for another meeting with the PGFTU, this time in what is regarded as the economic capital of Palestine. The challenges facing the PGFTU are common to unions everywhere. Demands for recognition rights in employment programmes, ensuring decent working conditions and striving to establish a Labour Court to adjudicate in disputes. They also have challenges peculiar to the occupation. These include defending the right of free movement, and even “stressing the workers’ right to work in the Israeli projects as long as the occupation continues.” Engaging the ILO and others to challenge the violations of workers’ rights by Israel.

We learned that Palestinian workers have to pay “organising fees” to the Histadrut (the Israeli Trade Union Federation) as “foreign workers” within Israel. Only part of which has been duly returned to the PGFTU. In addition the Israeli state has made excessive deductions amounting to billions of shekels from Palestinian workers for National Insurance, Equalisation tax, sick pay etc – none of which they benefit from. (see “The Economy of the Occupation” No 25 www.kavlaoved.org.il and www.alternativenews.org.) Notwithstanding their stance on employment within Israel, the PGFTU remained committed to the policy of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions as being the only peaceful strategy likely to make Israel meet its obligations under International Law.

We left Nablus to head back to Bethlehem for dinner at the Grotto restaurant (sic) and to watch some Debkeh dancers. I didn’t know what to expect and was absolutely charmed by the dancing and the rich, romantic folk culture it represented.

**Thursday - Jerusalem**

To King George Street, Jerusalem and a meeting and settlement tour organised by the ICHAD. The Israeli guide from ICHAD was very clear – all peace talks are used as cover by Israel to make “facts on the ground” in terms of settlements, which are critical to their dominance over the Palestinians.
Unable to match the natural population growth of the Palestinians, the settlements provide a means to prevent any viable Palestinian state with any measure of autonomy over its territory. The most recent, apparent suspension, of settlement building was simply to spare Barak Obama’s blushes and had been signalled far enough ahead that the builders knew to spend the preceding months laying concrete foundations, as building work which had already commenced was not suspended. The US government and the EU of course know this, but say nothing. We visited Mount Scopus where we saw one of “the facts on the ground”, a settler only road proudly sponsored by the Jewish National Fund (Canada section).

Patrons of the fund in Britain include David Cameron and Gordon Brown. It even has charitable status. We learned too that settlers with six or more children get their accommodation free. The size of some of the settlements is a surprise, some are substantial towns in themselves. The tour also enabled us to see the strategic placement of settlements in high ground dominating the neighbourhood and “protected” thereafter by the course of the Separation Wall.

Sheikh Jarrah
We visited Othman Ben ‘Af'an Street, in Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem where we saw a Palestinian man outside the house the Israeli authorities have scheduled for demolition. While we were talking to the man, the Israeli settlers who had moved into the house opposite called the police who arrived within minutes. We were to return to Sheikh Jarrah on Friday.

Jerusalem - Old City
At the end of the tour we went sight-seeing in old Jerusalem. The current walls were built by Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent in 1538, during the Ottoman period. The atmosphere in the old city with its Christian, Muslim, Armenian and Jewish Quarters is intoxicating and it houses the Temple Mount and its Western Wall (Wailing Wall) of importance to Jews, the Dome of the Rock and al Aqsa Mosque of importance to Muslims and not least the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where Christ is believed to have ascended to Heaven, leaving behind a footprint.

We soon came across the Via Dolorosa. I’m not at all religious, but did feel a genuine sense of history and awe in being there. I even got a little excited to be completing the Stations of the Cross, albeit a little haphazardly and without any great religious understanding, as we made our way to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. We weren’t too far in before we noticed (you couldn’t miss it) Ariel Sharon’s apartment in the middle of the Muslim Quarter, marked by a giant Israeli flag draped from the window. A few yards away – another apartment in which Jewish Settlers had ostentatiously built a Sukkah (a temporary hut built during the Sukkot festival which marks the “return from the Wilderness”).
Meeting with some of the kids from the Balata UNRWA refugee camp
After making our way through the narrow alleys of the market we entered the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which actually houses several Christian denominations including the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Oriental Orthodox Churches. Again despite the absence of religious faith I found it fascinating to be in a place and amongst a history that has helped shape the world we live in.

We made our way back on a public bus to Bethlehem. Just like the locals we had to disembark at the checkpoint, make our way through the single turnstile, having shown our passports to the Israeli security guard, walk a few hundred yards across a compound, down through a wire-caged alleyway and out through a turnstile onto a back street, to make our way the rest of the journey to the hotel in a private taxi.

Bil’il Village protest 1 October 2010

Friday had been kept free with no meetings or events booked for us, but some of the group decided to hire a bus and go to Bil’in to lend support to the Friday demonstration. I had been told by union colleagues not to come home from my “holiday” “unscathed” and decided to join them. We arrived in reasonable time and having visited on Wednesday, were familiar enough with where we would be going. As our group was largely Dublin based some had brought the Irish Tricolour to indicate country of origin.

We joined Japanese and other “internationals” as we are called and followed the demonstration which gathered following Friday prayers. On the way a young Palestinian took a NIPSA balloon I’d intended to tie to the fence. I found out later he was the brother of Baseem Abu Rahmah, mentioned previously. We were at the fence a matter of minutes chanting “Palestine will be free” and a few other slogans, when the Israelis fired teargas at us. We were offering no threat and knew not to as the villagers would be the people who would suffer later in night raids. We moved down the hill until the gas cleared and then came back up and in a gesture of defiance sang the Fields of Athenry. We’d got through the first verse when the teargas rained down worse than before. Running down the hill again we blamed each other for bad singing, we could think of no other reason for the attack on us!
Our protest of 1 October 2010 can be viewed on the village website www.bil’in–village.org and a different extract on Youtube, in which someone with a voice uncannily like mine shouts “fascists” and thereafter a swearword.

We left Bil’in a bit shaken by the ferocity of the Israeli soldiers and upset by their dreadful oppression of the villagers whose hospitality we had enjoyed.

Sheikh Jarrah - Jerusalem
With the tear gas clearing from our lungs we made our way to another protest in East Jerusalem at Sheikh Jarrah

This weekly protest is an overwhelmingly Jewish protest against the settlers cleansing and colonising of Othman Ben ‘Afan Street.
At Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem a small group of Israeli settlers shouted abuse at the demonstrators.
Settlers had got a toe hold in the area, first squatting in the house of a Palestinian who was on holiday in the USA and then by using the housing permit laws to expel Palestinians from homes they had renovated or extended without the necessary permit (which of course they would never get). ISM and Christian volunteers occupy one of the houses in an attempt to prevent its demolition. Adding insult to injury, a Palestinian who has his house demolished for not having a permit, has to pay a fortune for the privilege. In the middle of the protest was the Palestinian man we’d met the day before, speaking through a loudhailer in Arabic and Hebrew to the crowd gathered in solidarity with him and his neighbours. Their placards read things like - “Jerusalem won’t be Hebron”. As the protest moved through the area towards the dual carriageway, a small group of settlers arrived to shout abuse from across the traffic barrier. Within minutes, Israeli police, IDF soldiers and a group of very sinister looking security men dressed in black arrived. It was immediately apparent that their role was to “protect” the settlers and they did not impede them in any way, making sure they didn’t move so closely to them, that it might have made them in any way uncomfortable. Sheikh Jarrah’s protest now has the world’s attention with ex US President Jimmy Carter and ex Irish President Mary Robinson attending a subsequent protest on behalf of the Elders, the group of former senior political leaders whose existence was “inspired” by Bono.
Tel Aviv

We made our weary way back to Bethlehem with our week’s work done and with some slight trepidation at the grilling we might get at the airport on the way home that night. Most of all I feared the confiscation of my camera card.

I’d grabbed an old spare card to bring with me for this eventuality. It was only when I got to Bil’in and put it in the camera that I saw it contained footage of the ICTU protest in Belfast against the slaughter in Gaza. Not my finest hour. On the way to the airport and back into pilgrim mode, we teased each other about our favourite “holy sites” that we’d visited. I opted for the “Milky Grotto” because it built healthy teeth and bones and was kind to my teeth. Nobody wanted to stand near me at the airport. I should confess I was also sporting a Fez. Still, I wasn’t questioned and was waved through whilst the Italian Priest behind me was summoned aside to have his suit case contents examined.

Postscript

At Christmas I checked the Bil’in Village website and was amused to see that a group of fully dressed Santas had protested at the fence on Christmas Eve. We’d resolved to return next year as Leprechauns and this would break the ground for us. I returned to the website in the New Year and was horrified to learn that Bassem’s sister, Jawaher Abu Rahmah had died on New Year’s Day after suffering gas inhalation at the last demonstration of the year on New Year’s Eve.

Golda Meir once said “there is no such thing as the Palestinian people.” Well there is. I’ve met them and they will always be in my heart.

 Israeli police, IDF soldiers and a group of very sinister looking security men dressed in black arrived. It was immediately apparent that their role was to “protect” the settlers

Palestinian man we’d met the day before, speaking through a loudhailer in Arabic and Hebrew to the crowd gathered in solidarity with him and his neighbours

Dedicated to the memory of Bassem and Jawaher Abu Rahmah and the village of Bil’in.

Michael Robinson: ICTU Trade Union Friends of Palestine

If you are interested in participating in a similar trip to the West Bank, please contact Elaine at westbanktrip@eircom.net for details