

Gabi Froehlich, German journalist working for the Catholic News Agency, visited Gaza on Sunday 19 December 2009 and interviewed our student Berlanty Azzam.

Christmas list: “Just away!”

On Christmas the atmosphere in Gaza is depressed.

By Gabi Froehlich, KNA [German Catholic News Agency]

Gaza (KNA). Accompanied by the wailing sirens of a rickety ambulance, the convoy of the Patriarch speeds through Gaza city passing by fields rumpled by tanks riddled facades and donkey carts. The inhabitants of the bolted coast strip tend to use more and more archaic vehicles due to the fuel shortage. Again and again one sees completely covered woman on the curbside. Black dressed Hamas man stop the traffic to let the representative of the church pass.

In the courtyard of the Parish “Holy Family” a troop of scouts greets the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem with drum roll. The scouts’ uniform is a white shirt; more can’t be afforded in Gaza. In the courtyard several hundred believers are crowded together. One sees white, blue and black robes of nuns and monks. Children are dressed up as Santa Clause. Patriarch Foud Twal shakes hands – the appointment in the conflict area is a set date in his agenda: Every year he visits the most challenged believers of his diocese on Sunday before Christmas to encourage them.

The people welcome the delegation from Jerusalem friendly, but the atmosphere is depressed. Sometime, a stone is thrown from the outside on the courtyard and hits one of the Christians at the head. “They don’t like us” says a young man and nods in the direction of the street. “They” that is the Muslim majority. The Arabic Christians are in the eyes of many traders friends of the Western World. Around 250 Catholics belong to the Parish. Altogether, there are 2,500 Christians in Gaza, which used to be a flowering monastery landscape during the Byzantine era. This was a long time ago. Today Christians in Gaza want only one thing: Just to be away.

“I hate Gaza” says Salama Saba. Her second son Naseem died in the hail of bombs of the Israeli “operation cast lead”. This Christmas will mark the first anniversary of the military offensive against Hamas in Gaza with more than 1,300 killed. “I cannot enjoy Christmas anymore in this place”, bewails Salama. Her oldest son studies in Germany and wants to get her and his youngest brother out of there. That is what Salama holds onto, “this simply must work out.”

In the church, a youth choir sings Arabic Christmas carols. The youth work is one of the main concerns of Reverend Jorge Hernandez: More than 100 youth come every Wednesday night and more than 150 children show up on Saturdays. They sing together, learn about the church, pray and eat. “Cause who knows, if they have enough food at home” says Hernandez. The Argentinean from the congregation Verbo Incarnado (“incarnated word”) is in charge of the Parish since Easter. He himself is still young, a friendly giant with the rock-solid believe that God will change even the worst situation to the better.

This is also what Twal assures in his homily during the mass in the Christmassy decorated church: God alone can bring peace, which all people here long for. “More than 60 years of conflict is too much!” calls the Patriarch. “But the child in the crib sends light, even if it is dark all around.” After the mass, Twal hands over a brand-new ambulance to the Anglican hospital of Gaza, a donation of Caritas Jerusalem. Then the rooms of a small home for handicapped people in the compound of the Parish are inaugurated.

Among the scouts who bid farewell to the Patriarch’s convoy with another drum roll is Berlanty. The 21 year old was student of the Catholic Bethlehem University until a couple of weeks ago. Then she was caught at a checkpoint by Israeli soldiers: She did not have a permit to go to the West Bank. Handcuffed and blindfolded she was taken back to Gaza. “My feelings during this Christmas are split”, says Berlanty. “I am happy to see my family finally after four years. But tomorrow I should have an exam – I don’t know what the future will bring.”