

Published on the 20th of December 2009

By Malta Today

Link: <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/2009/12/20/t17.html>

A lonely Christmas in Gaza

In Bethlehem, a Christian carpenter sells little nativity cribs featuring Mary and Joseph carved behind the Israeli wall, with the three wise men caught on its other side, unable to cross over to visit Jesus.

Whoever visits Bethlehem knows perfectly how the Israeli separation wall surrounds Jesus' birthplace today, cutting it off from nearby communities and restricting Palestinians' movements.

Twenty-two year old Berlanty Azzam, a Palestinian Christian, will this year be added to the thousands of Palestinians denied entry into Bethlehem, after she was expelled from the West Bank last October.

Azzam, from Gaza, had been studying for a business degree at Bethlehem University for the last four years. Just two months away from her graduation, she went on a short trip to Ramallah for a job interview. On her way back, she was arrested, handcuffed and blindfolded at an Israeli checkpoint, and deported to Gaza.

Her crime, according to an Israeli court that upheld her deportation, was to have lived in the West Bank illegally. Even though she is Palestinian, Gazans are not allowed to live there.

The ban on travel for all Gazans becomes even harder for the 3,000 Christians during Christmas. Separated from Bethlehem by a few kilometres, Jesus' birthplace has never seemed so distant for them.

For the last three years, since Hamas took over Gaza, all men from the region aged under 35 were completely banned from travelling for Christmas. Last year, only 150 were allowed to travel. This year, there has been no news of any permits for Gazans yet.

It's a hard Christmas this year – Christmas day is just two days before the first anniversary of the 22-day attack by Israeli forces on Gaza. Some of those who were in Bethlehem last year ended up caught out during the war.

"They went to Bethlehem for a few days and ended up caught there for a month; some of them ran out of money," Kamel Ayyad, a public relations officer at the Archbishop's office by the 1,600 year-old Church of St Porphyry in Gaza City, said. "Some of them came back to find their houses damaged."

The Christians of Gaza may be the least heard of all Palestinians. Numbering just 3,000, with the overwhelming majority of them belonging to the Orthodox rite (who celebrate Christmas on 7 January), their numbers keep dwindling, as they tend to be typically middle class families in search of better opportunities. In 2006, 71 fled to the West Bank after a Christian was killed. Ayyad believes up to 40% of Christians would leave if the border had to open.

Mousa Al Bayouk, 17, from the Christian quarter in Gaza City, is studying to enter university. At his age, it will take him another two decades before he will get a permit to visit Bethlehem. He is not afraid of another war.

"We're used to the war, what do you want me to be afraid of?"

But he would like to leave Gaza for a future abroad.

"I would like to study abroad, in Greece, to become a mechanical engineer. I wouldn't want to return," he says. He then adds, almost apologetically: "If the situation was good I wouldn't want to leave."

Shadi Suheil Abu Daoud, a teacher of history at the Christian Latin Patriarch school in Gaza, does not believe Christians will leave Gaza and the West Bank.

"We have always been here, we are Arabs, Palestinians... part of this nation," he says. "Christians have been part of the Palestinian national movement," he says, referring among others to the famous leftist founder of the PFLP, George Habash.

"I don't like it when Palestinians leave our land. This is our country, we have to build our future," he adds. At the Christian school where he teaches, only 30 out of 382 children are Christian. Yet the school is also testament to the overall mutual respect that exists between Christians and Muslims in Gaza.

“Here you can find our church just next to a mosque,” Ayyad, who claims that his best friends are Muslims, says. “We welcome each other in our homes, we eat together. That’s how it has always been. We are all Palestinians, we are all suffering.”

The occasional incidents between the two communities are largely isolated attacks by extremist Islamist groups, or Salafists, which are at odds even with Hamas.

“Some Salafists try to create problems, because they know neither Christianity nor Islam,” Ayyad said.

Reflecting other Christians’ views, Shadi says Hamas brought order and security to the Gaza Strip.

“We feel protected,” he said. “The only problems we had were with some terrorists coming through the tunnels from Egypt who wanted to turn everyone into a Muslim. Their inspiration is Bin Laden and they are a problem even for Hamas here.”

Meanwhile, as pilgrims from around the world flock to Bethlehem and the rest of the Holy Land for Christmas and all year round, Christians in Gaza feel they are forgotten by their brethren.

“People go to visit Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Nazareth, but they hardly think of us,” Ayyad said. “All we want from them is to pray for us. We are in Jesus’ land and we are suffering today.”

“We ask the foreign tourists and pilgrims to demand an end to the occupation, and to pray for us,” Shadi said.