

## Report from Mas'ha

2007?

Munira unlocks a tiny gate embedded between an alarmed fence and an eight metre high concrete wall, and ushers the Danish television crew across a military road and quickly into his home. Two Canadian farmers, and three activists from Germany, South Africa and France are already seated inside, having come to interview Hani and Munira Amer on “life in the one-family Bantustan”, as their home has become known since Israel built the Apartheid Wall and three fences around it. Hani says that since today is the anniversary of the main catastrophe to befall his family, he wants to tell us about his life from the beginning.

He starts in 1948, when Palestine was first occupied by the Zionist forces that set up the state of Israel. His family fled their home in Kufr Kasem, a town annexed by Israel. (Kufr Kasem residents came under attack again and again in the years that followed. On 29 October 1956, Israeli Border guards massacred 49 villagers, including seven children and nine women, after changing the daily curfew starting at 6pm to 5pm and then killing the latecomers.)

Hani's grandfather was killed by the Israeli army during their flight in 1948, and the family arrived as refugees in Mas'ha village, about ten kilometres away. Without a breadwinner they lived under the trees for ten years until they built a house.

In 1972, Hani built his own home in Mas'ha. For the 32 years since then, he lived “as usual” (under military occupation like any other Palestinian). He got a job managing the irrigation of the land of the Palestinian village Azzun Atma, 10 minutes away. He and Munira had four children and in the late nineties, they established a nursery at home, growing and selling olive and citrus saplings, grape vines, flowers, fertilizers and decorative trees.

Hani and Munira's house is the farthest west in Mas'ha. When Elkana settlement was built in the 1980's, it stole Mas'ha land up to within 20 metres of the Amer's front door.

Hani and Munira say that the occupation, the land theft, and the settlement were “small sufferings” compared to the “main catastrophe” which began exactly one year ago today — on February 6th, 2003. High-ranking soldiers from the Israeli army arrived at the Amer house. They said the family had two choices: to allow their house to be demolished so that the Apartheid Wall could be built, or to stay in their house and have the wall built on one side between it and Mas'ha. The house would be totally isolated from Mas'ha and fall alone on the settler side of the Wall. Yet they would not be allowed into the settlement as Palestinians. Instead the other three sides of their house would be fenced in. “You have no third choice” said the soldiers. Mas'ha

They started to offer Hani money to move out of his house but he said, “in my eyes, this land will cost you the combined national budgets of America and Israel and even then I might not agree to sell it.”

Four months later, the soldiers said they would build the Apartheid Wall on the other side of the house, next to the settlement. The Amer house would remain in Mas'ha village. A little while later, this decision had been reversed. The soldiers arrived with a map and said they would separate the family from the village after all, because the settlers had protested. “It is up to you if you prefer to remain or to leave,” they said. Yet another group of soldiers arrived after this. They told Hani to leave the house for four years and then return. They did not explain this absurd request.

One day the whole family was visiting in Mas'ha. When they went home they found 30 Israeli soldiers surrounding their house. The soldiers said there was a military order that declared the house to be other side of the "border", in Israel. The Amers were not allowed back for 15 days. When they finally returned, they found the olive and citrus saplings, grape vines, flowers, fertilizers and decorative trees all destroyed — a loss of tens of thousands of dollars. It was 1948 all over again.

The Amer family sank what remained of their savings into a poultry farm in Azzun Atma. "Each chicken cost eight dollars. I bought 3000 chickens, water tanks, an electricity generator, and paid for the building," said Hani. After the wall was built he was rarely allowed out of the house and had to sell the farm because he couldn't take care of the chickens every day. He lost a lot of money because since the second intifada started, Israel has slashed jobs for Palestinians, who don't have spare cash to buy poultry farms.

Hani also used to keep 15 goats and sheep. "They weren't for business but just because I liked them," he says. He sold them all, again at low prices, because the sheep pen was demolished in July 2003 and in any case he knew he would not be able to take them out through the gates to graze.

"Our main catastrophe came after the wall was built. We are now suffering deeply. We are under psychological pressure from the wall and the terrorism of settlers who throw stones in the night," says Hani. Two weeks ago, 20 settler men came inside the gate at 1:30am in the morning, smashing the water tank, solar panels and windows with rocks. The Amer children have been stoned several times by settlers while playing. The front gate between the Amer house and Elkana settlement is the only one which is always unlocked, allowing Israeli settlers free access to the vulnerable Palestinian family, who could not escape out of the other gate into Mas'ha since it is kept locked by the soldiers. The so-called "security fence" in Mas'ha in fact impounds the "terrorists" (the Amer family) in the same area as the very Israeli settlers who claim to need protection from Palestinians.

After the stoning of the house, Israel's Channel 1 television station came to interview the Amers and produced a show comparing the Amer's life to life in a prison or ghetto. Three days later, the high-ranking officers were back. They asked the Amers how they dared talk against the Israeli army on Israeli TV. They told the Amer family that they could not want for more than their own gate to Mas'ha village. "What use is the gate if you lock us in or out when you please and prevent my family and visitors from coming to my house?" asked Munira. The soldiers then finally handed over the key to the gate, seven months after it had been built, but added that if they saw any more journalists or visitors of any kind coming to the house, they would demolish it.

After losing the flowers, the plants, the vines, the olive and citrus trees, the sheep and the goats, and the chickens and the eggs, Hani is about to lose his job. Because of the fence and the wall and the gates, he can't get to work in Azzun Atma on time. The ten-minute journey became a one to two hour journey. This makes life difficult for the Palestinian farmers who need to irrigate their land regularly. Hani said since he knows the importance of water to farmers, he would agree if they want to replace him.

Thus, Hani, Munira and their four children have lost everything. Very soon they will have no way to sustain themselves. Munira is suffering from stress. She is alone all day in the house while Hani is at work and the children are at school. She cannot leave the house unguarded and

go to the Women's Club or anywhere else, because she fears settlers or soldiers will occupy it. At the same time she feels ill-equipped, walled away from her neighbours, with nobody to call for help, to protect the house alone against another possible attack by 20 settler men.

Hani blames "Bush, Sharon, the Palestinian Authority and the Arab States" for their situation. "I have never seen a leader from the Palestinian Authority in any of these villages," he says. "They did nothing to support us farmers against the Wall. I want to address President Yasser Arafat through you. He calls us terrorists for resisting the Israeli Occupation. Does he think now I've lost my land that I can emigrate to Canada or Europe? The mother of all tragedies is that Israeli activists and the people of the world know my case and support me while Yasser Arafat, my own President, is against me."

While the family's situation is as desperate as it gets, they have vowed never to give in to the Israeli Occupation Forces. On the occasion of the first anniversary of their "main catastrophe", they dictated this message to the world: "Today there's a lot of injustice. All world leaders are practicing injustice. Bush represents injustice. This can't continue. It will have to come to an end. We are simple people and we are proud that as simple people we can stand up to the Israeli army. We have never felt weak although our situation wants to weaken us. We are standing against injustice and this gives us a lot of strength. We call on every person in the world not to succumb, and to fight injustice, wherever it is."