

Village Update: Bruqin

30 September 2012 + June 2012

Today (30/9/12) the IWPS team visited the village of Bruqin.

We first visited the Bruqin municipality and spoke with the mayor, ES, about the continuing pollution issues the villages face as a result of chemical waste water from the Barqan Industrial Settlement (the second largest industrial area in the West Bank and the 5th largest in the Middle East) and sewage from Ariel which comes down between the houses in the valley and pollutes the village springs. Both Bruqin and Kafr ad-Dik are now forced to buy water for personal use from Mekorot and the Israeli government only allows an allocation of 363 cubic litres per 24 hours for the two villages together (10,000 people).

The village has serious concerns about the health implications of the chemical waste water and it was mentioned that many villagers have developed cancer. The factories in the Barqan Industrial Settlement are not allowed to operate within Israel because they do not meet health and safety requirements.

We were driven later in the day by FD (from the political party al-Mubadra - 'Palestinian Initiative') to an area where the sewage from Ariel flows through the village. The smell was terrible and we were told about the issue of new species of snakes and mosquitoes in the area now as a result of the sewage. FD told us about a German initiative to introduce a water recycling system at Kafr ad-Dik, which the Israeli authorities would not allow to operate.

FS mentioned that he has been appealing to organisations (Palestinian, international and Israeli) since 1989 in relation to this issue of water pollution, but as of yet there has been no resolution.

FS also raised the issues of land theft (about 5000 dunams stolen from Bruqin farmers altogether), farmers having trouble accessing their land due to the nearby checkpoint, and wild boars released by settlers in the area which destroy trees and crops and also attack people. He also spoke briefly about the Palestinian workers in Barqan, noting that they are paid less than their Israeli counterparts and that their employment is insecure because they need a licence from the DCO to work in the settlement and this can be withdrawn at any time.

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In our rounds of village visits this spring, we have been especially concerned to visit Bruqin to learn more about the pollution problems they are having from the Barqan Industrial Settlement. The illegal industrial settlement produces plastics, glass, petroleum products and chemicals, among other toxic waste producers. All of the products on the estate have been forbidden on Israeli soil because of this toxicity, considered a hazard to human health and the environment.

A couple of years ago one of our volunteers was made aware of severe health issues caused by the pollution, but was not able to follow up on it. Later teams were unsuccessful in getting proper water testing done as it required coordination from the village and specialists in hydrology at one of the area universities. Among other duties, we were unable to follow this up. We had learned that testing had been done, but on this day we found out that it was an Israeli company that did the testing. Not surprisingly,

that company found the water to be uncontaminated. However, increases in the number of cancers in the village (15 recently) and other unusual health problems, especially in the children –including spotty skin - belied those results.

We were happy to learn that Al Jazeera has taken an interest in the possible industrial pollution and has begun independent testing on the water in cooperation with Bir Zeit University. We also learned that large areas of once fertile land has become “dead” supporting neither agricultural crops or animal grazing land.

Our first host this day was a Secondary School English teacher.

He gave an impassioned talk, giving the historical context from the time Israelis first came to the area, stressing, as have so many people, the previous good relationships between Jews and Palestinians, and even the welcome and sharing with early kibbutzim settlers. The biggest problems had arisen with the establishment of the surrounding settlements and of these the greatest primary problem was to do with water. As in other parts of the Salfit region, including the Wadi Qana land belonging to Deir Istiya, the Israeli procedure is to drill artesian wells below the level of Palestinian wells, into the underlying water plateau; drain the water from the Palestinian lands, pump it up to the illegal colonial settlements, or to Israel so as to sell it to the settlements, and then to the Palestinians at twice the price .

“They steal our lands, cut down our trees, deprive us of water underground – our right from God – and sell the water to us. Where is the justice here? They drain the polluted water from the Burqan industries and the sewage water from the settlements into the village orchards, vegetable crops and the village wells.” Two wells have dried and the other, as we saw is full of sewage, so cannot be used. “Fifteen years ago the hills were full of wheat, now nothing will grow. So now they even want to steal our health, our life.”

Now, unable to farm and with few allowed to work in Israel, approx. 65% of the populous are unemployed and many excuses are given to withhold permits to enter into Israel - not only to work but to go elsewhere to school or university. These include arrest or imprisonment (apparently every family has had a member in prison), being in a demonstration, having connections with Lebanon or Syria or with Hezbollah or Hamas. Eventually, in absence of any other alternative, people are forced to leave the area, and obviously the situation will be even more severe if/when the wall is completed.

He mentioned the prevalent use of ‘Administrative Detention’ or equivalent, whereby you could be imprisoned without charge for 6 months and on the last day be given another 6 – for up to 5 years (though we know that many prisoners have been detained for far longer) ‘like Guantanamo’ as he commented. “We are put in a cage. They take our life as a toy.”

The sense of extreme anger, frustration and despair was later apparent in what for the team members was a very moving, and at times quite shocking experience. That evening a celebration was held of the Primary school Graduation. There were plays, songs, dances performed by what looked like four or five year olds upwards, on a stage with an open –air auditorium full of villagers. On and beside the performance area were posters honouring members/ relatives who were in prison – one had been in for 25 years for the revenge killing of a settler shooting, another was now in his 15th year for involvement in a

response to a settler attack. 3 more posters were at the back of the stage, and a little girl was crying, holding a poster of her brother.

The first play involved about thirty infant (kindergarten) kids playing villagers, three 'Israeli soldiers' who came on and massacred them all but one ; four tiny stretcher –bearers and a little girl who nursed her 'dead relative', wailing, with tears pouring down her face. The teacher said it was good for her to express her feelings.

Act followed act of resistance presentations and songs and traditional dances. As we left, about a score of tinies in ornate Bedouin traditional dress, were waiting to perform. We were reminded again of how unavoidable and real the suffering and effects of the occupation are for every member of the community, from the eldest to the youngest, and how it can only get worse unless there is outside international intervention.

This is not so for the villagers of Palestine. The visit to the place of their birth and childhood was precious Abu Nuwab and Sahmii. They were eager to tell us who lived in each (remnant) of the homes what was kept where, what kind of furniture was in each room, etc... As well they knew every tree, they knew where all the herbs were growing wild. After spending some time in the ruins we sat under a large carob tree and shared around food we had all brought. Sahmii made tea with miramia (sage) that he had gathered on the way up the mountain, and we all smoked from the hookah he had brought along. Some shepherds joined us for a time as well, so it was a bit of a party!

On our way back down the mountain we stopped numerous times to gather wild sage, mint, lettuce and spinach while our hosts sang songs about the land. Abu Nuwab said his children would ask him what he had brought them when he returned and he would show them the gathered food. I asked him if they would be happy with that and he said, "yes, they will be very happy." Everyone is sure the wild herbs from the mountain are better than what is cultivated around the village.

We also encountered some older teenagers once off the mountain. At first we thought they were settlers but as they drew nearer we recognized some of them being from Deir Istiya. The others were from one of the settlements. They had met up along the road and were walking together... a great sign of hope for me. Racism and hatred is taught, and these teenagers had not been indoctrinated to hate one another and it was natural for them to walk together.

Once we were near the main road, and surrounded by Palestinian citrus groves, we took a rest and had partook of the delicious oranges (a couple had been left in a sitting area for the hungry passerby. That is the Palestinian way.