

the *Palestinian* ORDEAL

BY INEZ TEWFIK

Jabalia refugee camp in occupied Gaza: a brutal sun illuminates the harsh expanses of yellow sand. Home to 80,000 Palestinians under Israeli occupation, the fear and frustration of its inhabitants is almost palpable in the ominous silence which echoes throughout the camp.

When I visited the refugee camps in Gaza during August, I saw mostly old men and women, and young girls. The majority of the young men, I was told, had gone to work in Israeli factories and construction projects, where the average daily wage, for what is often 13 hours of work, is only eight Israeli shekels (IS) — approximately eight Canadian dollars.

In every home I visited, at least one or two family members were imprisoned in Israeli jails. One elderly woman showed me photographs of her two sons, both of whom had been jailed by the Israeli military.

The inordinate number of Palestinians in jail is hardly surprising.

Israel governs the West Bank and Gaza through a labyrinthine system of regulations which define "security offences" as activities ranging from the possession of forbidden reading materials to wearing or drawing the colours of the Palestinian flag to planting bombs.

As well, there are provisions for arrest without charge and imprisonment for up to 18 days, at which time a prisoner must be taken before a judge. The judge may condemn the prisoner to a six month, renewable sentence — still without charges.

One old woman with eight daughters said she refused to allow them to work for the Israelis because of the harassment and poor working conditions to which migrant Palestinian workers are subjected. Though Jewish settlers in the occupied territories may come and go as they wish, it is illegal for Palestinians from the occupied territories to spend the night within the pre-1967 Israeli borders. Migrant workers must go to considerable expense — often half their salary or more — to travel back and forth.

Before 4 a.m., hundreds of men and women stand at a clearing in Gaza City. They are waiting for Israeli employers to come with trucks and pick those who will work for them that day. Those who are not chosen must return to their camps or villages empty-handed. This can prove devastating to the families they must support, there is no unemployment insurance, old age pension, or welfare for Palestinians, although they pay the same taxes as Israeli citizens.

Those who are chosen to work face additional problems. Some simply do not earn enough to cover transportation costs back and forth across the border. Though some employers transport their workers in crowded trucks, many are not willing to go to the trouble. As a result, a dangerous practice has arisen of locking workers overnight in the factories and "factory detention camps."

Noam Chomsky a world famous linguist and notable for his writings on U.S. foreign policy and the Middle East, writes in *The Fateful Triangle* that this "practice became public knowledge when several were found burned to death in a locked room after a fire in a small Tel Aviv factory. Others have been kept under armed guard behind barbed wire in factory detention camps, including one owned by Histadrut, the socialist trade union."

In a feature entitled "Letter from Tel Aviv" and published in a Jan. 24, 1986 issue of *Middle East International* maga-

zine, author Elfi Pallis describes his experience at the home of elderly Israeli friends:

"Clinging to the side of their house in a pleasant, tree-lined street in prestigious north Tel Aviv is a small, crooked cardboard shed. When I ask whether this is a playhut built by the resident's children, they put me right without a trace of embarrassment. It is 'the Arab' who stays in the shed during weekdays, they explained to me. He cleans and gardens for the street's residents and goes back to his village on weekends," writes Pallis.

Racism translated into government pol-

ity has meant the confiscation of land and the destruction of crops for most Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza. It has also meant high unemployment and levels of exploitation.

On May 18, 1976, the respected Israeli newspaper *Davar* published an article which claimed Palestinian workers are bet-

ween them. "There were houses here," I was told, but as the camps became overcrowded, "resistance to the occupation grew in the camp, in the form of protests, demonstrations and rock-throwing," said one young man from the camp who, fearful for this life, asked not to be identified. "One day, the army came and bulldozed

entire neighbourhoods to make room for their tanks to move around freely," said the young man.

On Feb. 19, 1985, Rabbi Moshe Levinger and members of his Gush Emunim settler movement organized a 15 week siege of Dheishah refugee camp in the West Bank.

Dheishah used to have 20 entrances, but they were gradually sealed off by the Israeli militia as punishment for stone-throwing by Palestinian children. By Oct. 8, Gush Emunim had blocked all but one of the entrances to the camp, filling them with concrete-filled oil drums and coils of barbed wire.

According to the *Palestinian Human Rights Newsletter*, "the practical effect of this policy of isolation and siege is to make day-to-day camp life extremely difficult. Traffic is stopped, daily shopping is

impossible, and medical emergencies are complicated because ambulances cannot speedily enter the camp."

The Gush Emunim followers of Rabbi Levinger were mostly armed, and ensured that no one save themselves could leave or enter the camp. Israeli soldiers patrolled nearby, seeming more intent on serving the

settlers than on dispersing them.

"We feel like we're trapped here, waiting for another Sabra-Shatila (massacre) to happen to us," said one woman, also wishing to remain unidentified.

After 15 weeks of seige, Levinger and his followers agreed to leave in exchange for a promise by Israeli Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin that Palestinian stone throwers would receive even harsher penalties in the future.

Since the siege, the harassment of Dheishah's refugees has increased. Huge floodlights illuminate the camp at night, ensuring that there is no privacy; watchtowers loom over the barbed wire, and the refugees of Dheishah continue to live with insecurity — they have been deprived of their property and their freedom.

In the spring of 1982, after the Israeli authorities had dismissed several West Bank mayors widespread protests occurred during which many protestors were shot, beaten and tortured by the occupying army.

During the trial of seven members of the Israeli army in December that year, Captain Atzi Mordechai, an Israeli officer serving in the West Bank, testified that, in addition to working "to discover the provocateurs, you *tertur* the population. Population *tertur* does not mean that you punish those who did something, but you just round up everyone, just like that."

The word *tertur* is Hebrew army slang, and although its exact meaning is argua-



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The word *tertur* is Hebrew army slang, and although its exact meaning is argua-

ble, it is generally agreed that it refers to the semi-tortuous exercises that are considered degrading for a soldier to carry out.

American newsmagazine *Newsweek* further clarified the meaning of the word in a special feature article on political prisoners in February, 1983. "Beyond constant police patrols, the most common manifestations of *tertur* are the wholesale roundups that take place whenever West Bank Arabs stage a demonstration.

"Israeli border police have been witnessed forcing Arabs to sing the Israeli national anthem, slap each other's faces and to crawl and bark like dogs," said the article in *Newsweek*. "The police also arrest thousands of Arabs each year on 'security' charges which can range from blatant terrorism to simply reading black-listed books."

In Jabalia, an old woman gestures towards the shelter that served as a home to her husband and children. "They threw us off our land and destroyed our house because their laws said it was illegal for us to live there. They destroyed our house in the camp five times because we will not be 'relocated' away from our families. So even this shelter is illegal.

"According to their laws, we are illegal," said the old woman, "because we are Palestinian."

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