

{FEBRUARY 25 2006}

# AN EXTRAORDINARY CONFERENCE

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**A** final score of 1:1 may not be the most impressive, but for the youngsters of Bil'in it was a glorious achievement. For them, it was not the result that was important, nor even the match itself (against a team from the nearby town of Betunya). What was important was where it took place: on an improvised football field that was hastily leveled on the land that was stolen from the village by the Separation Wall.

The match was a part of a unique event. In the poor, little village, with its 1500 inhabitants, which few had ever heard of before the start of its heroic battle against the Wall, an "International Conference on the Joint, Non-violent struggle Against the Wall" took place. In the framework of this event, which lasted for two days, a range of activities was organized: reports and debates about the struggle, the award of honor shields to the families of the nine people who lost their lives in the fight against the Wall, the planting of olive saplings on the stolen land, the inauguration of the football field and the match itself.

I had the honor of being invited to deliver one of the opening speeches, before an audience of 300 people – inhabitants of Bil'in, members of the Palestinian parliament, representatives of the struggle in several areas along the Wall, Israeli peace activists and delegates from European solidarity groups. This is what I said:

DEAR FRIENDS,

Every time I come to Bil'in, I am excited and happy.

This village, this little village, has become a symbol in Palestine, in Israel, indeed throughout the world. Your fight reflects the struggle of the entire Palestinian people.

Three traits distinguish the struggle of Bil'in, three characteristics that complement each other and together make Bil'in as extraordinary as it is:

First, the tenacity, persistence and courage of the Palestinian people..

Second, the partnership with the Israeli peace camp.

Third, the support of solidarity movements all over the world.

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To these one can add another characteristic that marks Bil'in as a shining example: the complete non-violence of the fight.

A few days ago, the Dalai Lama visited this country. He met important people and celebrities and had his picture taken with them. I would have advised him to come to Bil'in and learn a lesson in non-violence.

When we try to analyze the struggle, we have always to come back to the essence of the matter: In this country, there live two peoples, two nations, and the aim of our endeavors is to create peace, peace based on justice.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not resemble any other struggle in the world. It is not a repeat of the South African ordeal, nor a second edition of the Algerian War of Liberation. This is a unique conflict, brought about by unique circumstances.

A famous historian described it this way: A person lives on an upper floor of a building in which a fire has broken out. To save his life, he jumps out of a window and lands on top of a passer-by, who is grievously hurt. Between the two, a mortal enmity ensues.

Who is in the right? The person who jumped out of the window to save his life? Or the second person, who was hurt and ruined without having done anything wrong?

The Zionist movement was born because Europe was becoming a hell for the Jews – fifty years before the Holocaust, the terrible Holocaust that killed millions of Jews, and in the wake of which the State of Israel was founded. The first Zionists believed that the country was empty. Their main slogan was: “A country without people for a people without a country.” When the Zionists discovered that there was a population already living in this country, they tried to push it out. This effort continues until this very day – and so does the tenacious struggle of the Palestinian people for its existence and its land.

That is the reality of the conflict – two peoples living in the same country and fighting each other. The struggle of Bil'in against the Wall that is stealing its land is a part of this historic conflict.

Thirty two years ago, right after the Yom Kippur War, the Ramadan War, Yasser Arafat drew the conclusion that there is no military solution to this conflict. He resolved to seek a political settlement.

A small group of Israeli peace activists decided to join this initiative. We set up the Israeli Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace. Arafat instructed his emissaries to contact us – first Sa'id Hamami, then Issam Sartawy, two senior Fatah leaders. Both were later murdered by the enemies of peace and the enemies of Arafat. May their memory live with us.

In 1982, in the middle of the Lebanon War, I crossed the lines and met with Arafat in

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beleaguered Beirut. In the middle of the battle, in the middle of the bombardments, Arafat talked about peace between our two peoples.

Arafat was already laying down a strategy based on three principles: to persist in the struggle of the Palestinian people, to hold out the hand to the Israeli peace camp and to call for international solidarity. These are also the three principles of Bil'in today.

You may ask – indeed, you must ask: What has the Israeli peace movement achieved?

On the face of it – nothing. On the contrary, since the Oslo agreement, the situation of the Palestinians has worsened from year to year. The economic misery is deepening even further. Every day, people are being killed. The construction of the monster Wall is continuing. The racist settlements are spreading rapidly. Just now we learned that the Jordan Valley – a third of the West Bank – is being cut off from the Palestinian territory and practically annexed to Israel. The victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections is a result of these actions.

All this is happening in plain view. But below the surface a contrary process is at work.

Fifty years ago, only a handful of people in Israel and around the world recognized the existence of the Palestinian people. Even 32 years ago, Golda Meir could declare that “there is no such thing as a Palestinian people”. Nowadays there is no normal person in Israel and the world who denies the existence of the Palestinian people and its right to a state of its own. That is a victory for the tenacious Palestinian struggle, but also for the Israeli peace movement.

Twenty years ago, when we called for negotiations with the Palestinian Liberation Organization, we were a small band. We were told that Arafat was a murderer, that the PLO was a terrorist organization, that the Palestinian Charter called for the destruction of Israel – exactly the same phrases which are now being used about Hamas. But a few years later, the State of Israel recognized the PLO, negotiated with it and signed an agreement with it. That was a victory for the tenacious Palestinian struggle, but also a victory for the Israeli peace movement.

Dear friends,, it is very easy to despair. Every one of us has moments of depression. But I am convinced that peace will win, justice will win.

A few weeks ago I was in Berlin. In the shops there, pieces of the Berlin Wall are on sale. I paid 2.50 Euros for one of them. The day will come when here, in Bil'in, in the free State of Palestine, one will be able to buy pieces of the Wall that we are fighting against today.

Every time when I am in Bil'in and other places in occupied Palestine, I can't help thinking what a paradise this country would be if there were peace, peace based on justice and mutual respect.

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This peace will come. And when it comes, the last wish of Yasser Arafat, whose picture hangs here, will be fulfilled: his remains will be interred in Jerusalem.