

Tradition hits Israeli barrier as Palestinians try to harvest olives

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Bethlehem, West Bank, November 15 (ENInews)--Though the olive branch is a symbol of peace, harvesting olives for Palestinians, when they have to pass through a military-manned barrier to get to their land in an occupied area, is a point of conflict.

Against this background and for the seventh year, the Joint Advocacy Initiative, a programme of the East Jerusalem YMCA and the YWCA of Palestine, has hosted a group of 75 international volunteers to assist Palestinians with their traditional olive harvest.

The YMCA and YWCA both describe themselves as working for peace with justice based on humanitarian and Christian values.

Whereas in the northern West Bank Palestinian farmers face the threat of attacks and damage to their trees from Israeli settlers, in the Bethlehem region the farmers lack free access to their land. JAI campaign officer Baha' Hilo says this is because of the Israeli barrier that separates many of the farmers from their land.

Close to Bethlehem, Christian farmers have land but expansion of the barrier has kept them from reaching their orchards in 2010. The farmers first have to get permits to cross through special gates, explained Hilo.

Israeli soldiers are supposed to come at appointed times to open the gates to allow the farmers through. Yet, Hilo complains, oftentimes the soldiers are late at best, and farmers are left waiting, or at worst the Israelis do not show up at all.

Also, the permits are generally given only to farmers and their wives, many of them elderly. Other younger members of the family are not allowed on to the land to help with the labour-intensive olive harvest.

"The wall in Beit Jalla is sealed and there are so many olives that need to be picked. It is a lot of work. It is very hard for one person to do the harvest," said Hilo.

Israeli human rights groups documented 35 cases of olive tree vandalism in the first six weeks of the traditional Palestinian olive harvest, which normally takes place in a few short weeks between October and November.

A group of JAI volunteers spent a morning in late October helping out on Mohamid Aballah Abudia's farm, which is sandwiched between the two Israeli settlements of Migdal Oz and Efrat.

"We have to stand up for our land so [the Israelis] won't steal it," said Abudia, noting that his Israeli neighbours have not encroached on his property. "I am a quiet person and do not like to make a commotion but if my land is threatened, I will yell."

The JAI workers only went to Abudia's farm because they were unable to get to another farm in the Wadi Ahmad valley below Beit Jalla, which Israel has annexed to Jerusalem. Even then, they only got to Abudia's land after a day's delay. At first, they could not get across the barrier, so had to take a roundabout route through Jerusalem to the farmer's orchard.

"I am not good with demonstrations but here I feel I am doing something practical," said 70-year-old Anita Andersson, who is from Stockholm and a past world president of the YWCA and national president of the YWCA/YMCA of Sweden.

"This means getting down and working with our hands," explained Andersson. "I can see where we are doing some good, where a farmer cannot reach his land. It is doing something very simple. If there are olives, they need to be picked."