
WCC letter to Israeli ambassador in Switzerland to protest Israeli settlers' violence against Christian volunteers in Hebron

25 April 2006

Your Excellency,

We write you to register alarm and concern following a recent violent incident in Hebron. Our protest is on two levels.

First, on April 1, 2006, Silvana Hogg, a Swiss volunteer participating in the World Council of Churches and Swiss-supported Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), was attacked by a Jewish settler in the Old City of Hebron. Churches and civil society organizations in ten countries support EAPPI with personnel, including HEKS (*Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen Schweiz*), CFD (*Christlicher Friedensdienst*), Horyzon (*the International Cooperation of YMCA/YWCA Switzerland*), and Mission 21. The Swiss Federal Union of Churches (*Schweizerscher Evangelischer Kirchenbund SEK/FEPS*) is the patron of the programme in Switzerland. Peace Watch Switzerland is responsible for the implementation of the programme in Switzerland.

Every day in her work with the programme, Ms. Hogg and her co-workers accompany school children to and from school because the children are frequent targets of stone-throwing, kicking and spitting by the Israeli settlers who occupy three sites in the Old City. On this day, while waiting for the school children, a settler boy hit Ms. Hogg in the head with a large stone and she had to be rushed to hospital for treatment. Her full report is attached to this letter for your information and action.

This is not an isolated incident. On 25 March, an American volunteer was attacked by approximately 20 young settlers and hospitalized as a result. In January, during a visit to a local home near one of the settlements, Ms. Hogg, two co-workers and a Palestinian resident and his son were stoned by settler boys and trapped on a roof. On 20 April, two ecumenical accompaniers working on behalf of the EAPPI were attacked by fifteen young settlers in the Tel Rumeida district of Hebron.

Second, while these and similar incidents are serious in and of themselves, they are but a small fraction of the settler and other occupation-related attacks against Palestinians in Hebron, in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem. We cannot fail to include in this reckoning the substantial numbers of innocent civilians regularly killed and wounded by Israeli forces striking Gaza as well as the innocent civilians killed and wounded by suicide bombings in Israel. The World Council of Churches, long an advocate of equitable negotiations between both parties to resolve the conflict, strongly condemns all forms of violence and attacks perpetrated by the State of Israel inside the Occupied Palestinian Territories and by Palestinian armed groups inside the State of Israel.

As noted in the attached document, the attack on Ms. Hogg was reported to the police. Our previous experience is that such investigations often end without criminal proceedings against the settlers. It is not known if the police have yet taken action against the settler boy, despite the fact that photographic evidence of him was provided.

It is also important to address the role of soldiers of this context. Despite any and all efforts by individual soldiers to do the right thing about criminal behaviour by settlers, the practice of establishing, protecting and expanding settlements render soldiers impotent to carry out Israel's obligations under international law and complicit, through the army's routine inaction and inadequate responses to settler violence, in the criminal behaviour of settlers.

We conclude this letter by respectfully requesting three remedial actions based on the rule of law:

- Police and judicial action against the stone-throwing settler boy in this case
- Zero tolerance by soldiers for abusive, unlawful and violent behaviour by settlers toward Palestinians and internationals
- Concrete steps that lead to the complete withdrawal of all settlers from Hebron and return of settler-occupied properties to their Palestinian owners.

Shortly after the incident, Silvana Hogg was back on the streets accompanying the children, talking to soldiers and greeting the settlers who passed by. We thank you for your government's attention to her case and the larger issues it raises. We stand ready to provide additional information as needed, and look forward to receiving news of the remedial actions required, as noted above.

Sincerely,

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Director

Commission of the Churches on International Affairs

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