

“We will replant these trees again”

Resisting the ongoing Nakba: the story of Artas

By Anne Paq

Visitors of Artas are amazed by the beauty of this small village located South-East of Bethlehem. Artas is renowned for its water sources and fertile lands that run throughout the valley covered by greenhouses and trees. It has around 4,000 inhabitants and hosts an annual Lettuce Festival.

Artas, however, is also located close to the ever-expanding Gush Etzion settlement bloc and the route of the Wall. Last year, construction started on the hills surrounding Artas. In May this year, inhabitants discovered with concerns that the bulldozers were moving increasingly down, in the direction of the valley. The first land threatened with confiscation and destruction was a plot covered with beautiful apricot trees belonging to the Abu Sway family.

Unofficial information was disclosed to the family according to which the land would be confiscated and all the trees uprooted in order to build a sewage facility for the nearby settlements. It has also become increasingly obvious that the Wall would be built in this location. Construction of the illegal Wall and its associated regime, combined with the expansion of the settlements at the mouth of the valley and surrounding hills, will be a disaster for the whole village of Artas. It will not only entail more confiscation and pollution of agricultural lands, but also the destruction of a beautiful landscape and important natural heritage.



Israeli Bulldozer uprooting trees of the village of Artas, Bethlehem, May 2007. ©Anne Paq.

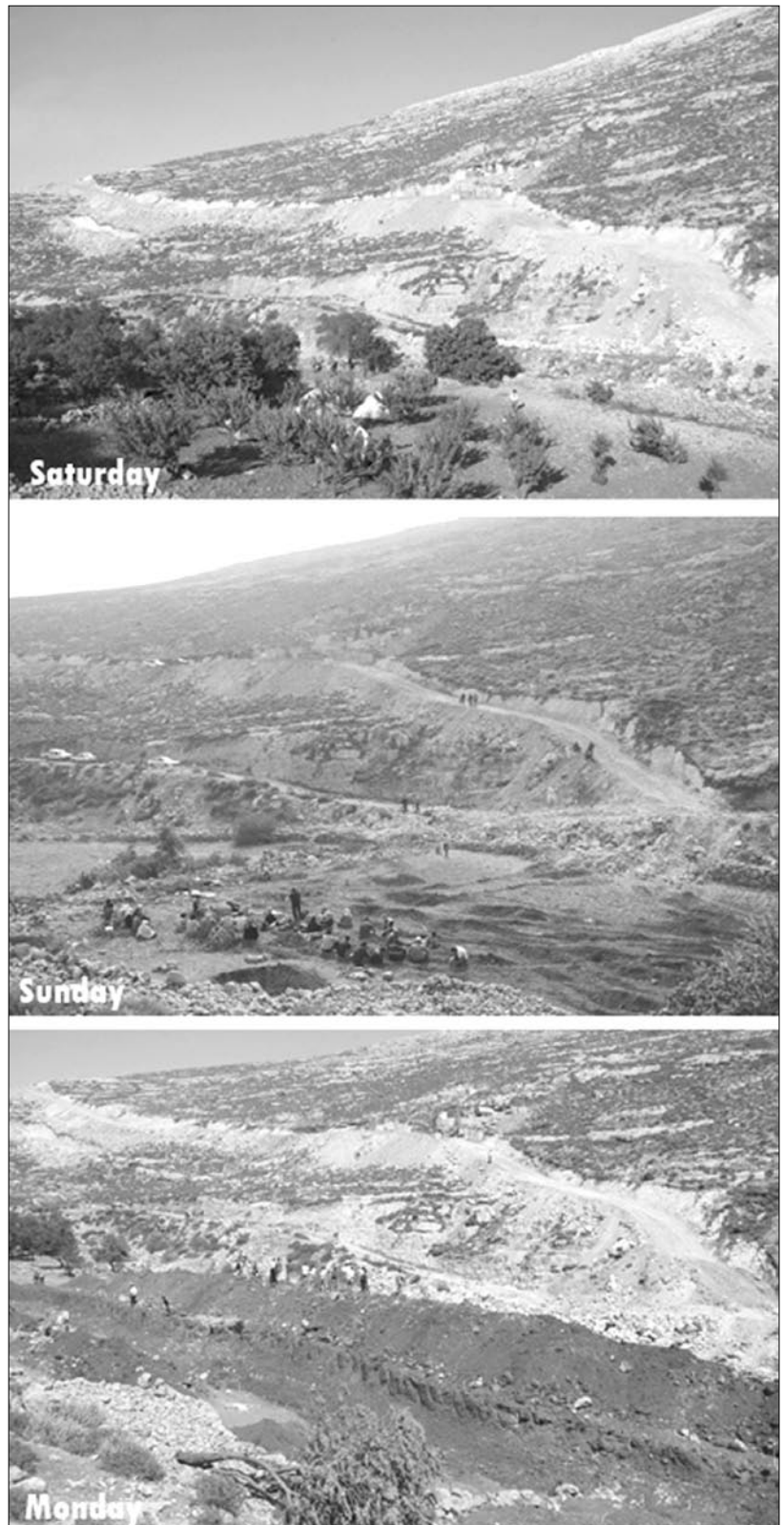
In May 2007, Awwad Abu Sway, together with other inhabitants from the village, launched an urgent appeal to Palestinians and internationals in order to try to prevent the confiscation of the lands. On May 18, the Israelis put an electric generator next to the Abu Sway family land in order to better control the site with big spot lights. Meanwhile, tents were organised, and for nights international activists together with Palestinians and Israelis slept under the threatened trees, despite repeated visits and harassment by Israeli soldiers.

On May 20, at 5.30 am, around 40 Israeli soldiers arrived at the site, removed the tents, violently pushed away the people and even threw them over a wall into an adjacent field. Then the bulldozer came to uproot all the trees, while the people continued to protest against this blatant injustice. As the trees were being uprooted, Awwad kept repeating to the soldiers: "I promise you, we will replant these trees."

Four Israelis were apprehended. In two hours, the field became a desolate landscape with holes instead of trees.

The Palestinian villagers sat down in silence under the burning sun in the destroyed field as a sign of protest and defiance. And indeed, the story of Artas was far from over. The very same afternoon, the inhabitants tried to replant some trees but were beaten by the soldiers. The next day a march of protest was organised. The private guards on the site reacted violently and started to shoot at the journalists. As the demonstrators were peacefully going back to the village, Israeli soldiers chased them, and brutally arrested three Palestinians, including Awwad. They were released five days after.

Since then, the demonstrations, as well as legal proceedings, continue in Artas. The soldiers have repeatedly prevented the people of Artas from reaching their lands in the close vicinity of the new installations. While international media attention is focused on the internal Palestinian



The targeted site in the village of Artas, Bethlehem, May 2007. ©Anne Paq.



Landowners facing the soldiers, Artas, Bethlehem, May 2007. ©Anne Paq.

conflict, the Israeli authorities continue to create facts on the ground in the occupied Palestinian territories through construction of the Wall and the expansion of colonies on Palestinian lands; there is no international protest. Construction of the Wall is going fast. Currently a big structure with concrete and steel has been erected on the field of the Abu Sway family, and the bulldozers are continuously working in the valley and the surrounding hills.



Landowners facing the soldiers, Artas, Bethlehem, May 2007. ©Anne Paq.



International and Israeli activists joining the protest against land confiscation, Artas, Bethlehem, May 2007. ©Anne Paq.

Together with the demonstrations in Um Salomona against the construction of the Wall and confiscation of Palestinian lands, Artas has become another symbol of non-violent resistance against the Israeli policies of colonization. Although the trees have been uprooted, the spirit of resistance has not.

Anne Paq is a photographer and the coordinator of a photo and video project at al-Rowwad in Aida camp.

UN Register of Damages on the Wall

The United Nations Register of Damage Caused by the Construction of the Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (UNROD) is officially established, and, as requested by the General Assembly, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has produced the first UNROD progress report on 14 June 2007.

The Secretary-General reports that he appointed on 10 May 2007 three international experts to the Board of the Register: Harumi Hori of Japan, Matti Paavo Pellonpää of Finland and Michael F. Raboin of the United States of America.

The Board first convened between 14 and 16 May at the Office of the Register of Damage in Vienna. The Board was briefed by UN staff and initiated work on drafting internal guiding documents. The Board discussed "the potential procedures that could be employed for the distribution and collection of damage claim forms in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the technical procedures that would be involved in the recording, storage and organization of those damage claims in the Office of the Register of Damage."

Another meeting of the Board between 9 and 13 July in Vienna will reportedly address Board responsibilities:

- (a) To establish the rules and regulations governing the work of the Office of the Register of Damage;
- (b) To determine the eligibility criteria for the inclusion in the Register of Damage of losses and damages that have an established causal link to the construction of the wall;
- (c) To apply such criteria to the determination of the categories of losses and damages that may be included in the Register of Damage;
- (d) To develop the format for the design of claim forms;
- (e) To agree on modalities of a public-awareness programme to inform the Palestinian public of the requirements for and logistics involved in the filing of a damage claim for registration.

Three years after the 2004 ICJ Advisory Opinion on Israel's Wall, however, UNROD is not operational in the OPT and Palestinian victims of damages remain unable to register their claims.

Source: Illegal Israeli actions in Occupied East Jerusalem and the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, UN General Assembly, A/ES-1022 ,389/ June 2007.