

Shabbat in Chavat Ma'On--May 8, 2006

Dear family and friends,

What follows is an account of my abrupt immersion into an action of resistance by Israeli peace activists. During the long day, there were only sporadic opportunities for me to ask for English translation, but the experience was both eerily familiar and self-explanatory. There was little need to reflect, to analyze, to interpret. We were there simply to protect children who were trying to get to school. An important way to spend Shabbat, it seemed to me. And so I joined them.

This is my report of that day.

Sandy

The first announcement was circulated by the political organization, Ta'ayush calling for the Hebron action. The second is a news story in the alternative press. I begin here to orient the reader to the geography and history of this action.

1) This Saturday, 6th May, we shall protest against the settlers' violence and the indifference of the security forces in South Mt. Hebron.

Last week, for instance, children from Tuba were attacked on their way back from school by settlers from Maon and in spite of the presence of military and police forces, the harassment of the children continued for a whole hour till Ta'ayush activists reached the spot. Settlers from Avigail, Soussia and its out-posts continue to attack Palestinians living in the region and damage their property, and the security forces manage always to arrive when it is too late.

Those wishing to join should send their name and phone-number to one of us.

From our experience in this region, the number of participants makes a great difference. Do try to help us.

South Mt. Hebron Committee

2) At-Tuwani release:

Tuba Children and Soldier Escort Ambushed by Ma'on Settlers

For the second week in a row, about 30 Ma'on settlers attacked the

children from Tuba and the Israeli soldiers escorting them on their way home from school on Shabbat (Saturday is the Jewish Holy Day). The ambush occurred at 1:15 pm at the roadblock that settlers built One May to block the escort jeeps. Settlers threw rocks at the children and soldiers, and kicked and punched them. Several children sustained injuries to legs and heads, three required medical attention. One soldier fired his gun in the air; police have not yet arrested any settlers.

"Better wear your helmet," one of the soldiers said to another as they began the escort. Two soldiers walked with the children, while one idled behind in the jeep as far as the roadblock. The carelessness of the Israeli military and police is put in stark relief by the presence in At-Tuwani throughout the day of one army humvee and three police vans. This show of force was intended to prevent Israeli peace activists from visiting At-Tuwani. At any point during the morning, the humvee could have removed the rocks of the roadblock with a logging chain; and a police presence with the escort of the school children might have prevented the attack.

Children reported on Tuesday morning that there was a roadblock on the longer path around the south of the Hill 833 outpost. The soldier in command Tuesday morning elected to use the shorter, more direct path from Tuba to At-Tuwani, but at Noon he reported that he had been criticized by his superior officers for that decision. The Israeli military has apparently decided that the school escort should continue to use the longer path, a route that passes close to dense forest that hides the houses of extremist settlers in the outpost.

All week both soldiers and police officers have said that the military would be removing the roadblock within a day, but the roadblock is still in place and will still provide a convenient point of attack for the settlers as long as the authorities continue to mandate the use of the longer path.

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Last Shabbat, I spent eight hours in the Hebron hills on a Ta'ayush action, designed to protect Palestinian schoolchildren from the settlers of Chavat Ma'on, zealots who recently put an elderly man from Soussia, a neighboring Palestinian village in the hospital after a severe beating.

We left Jerusalem at 10 am with two full vans of Israeli activists preparing to meet with a larger contingent from Tel Aviv. However,

one of the Tel Aviv vehicles was unable to get across a roadblock, so our Jerusalem vans drove to a nearby Palestinian village to wait for them. We gathered in a vineyard under a ripening apricot tree where chairs were set out for us and we were served water and hot mint tea by welcoming family members.

When the Tel Aviv vans arrived, one of the leaders gave us instructions, which Angie, an Englishwoman from the Israeli Coalition Against House Demolitions translated for me.

Our action is designed to accompany and protect the children on their way to school, because even with what appears to be cursory army and police protection, the settlers are still able to throw enormous stones and boulders at the children to keep them from traveling to school, thus requiring a circuitous back road taking nearly three times as long. We were directed to form two groups, one smaller one to engage and distract the police and army at the roadblock, while the other larger group would go around the back way to the village to get to the kids and protect them from the settlers. Ezra, our seasoned leader stressed the importance of the group staying together if or when someone is hurt or arrested.

As a gray haired woman, I was assigned to be a part of the smaller group because, as one of the young men said without a trace of irony, "You will provide gravitas."

Our group drove to the deserted roadblock at the intersection the children needed to cross, which the army had now designated as a closed military zone. They stopped our vehicles, the Israeli peace activists engaged the soldiers in animated Hebrew as I lend silent gravitas, or hoped I did, by standing firmly right there in front of their young faces.

The larger group set off on an hour long hike around the back of the village to stop the settlers from attacking the children. Our numbers made a difference this time and the settlers, after an initial attack, pull back. Most Ta'ayush actions in these villages have had less than 10 people with little success in stopping the violence against the children. But this time, with over 60 participants, the settlers withdrew.

After constant and animated cell phone contact between the larger group actively engaging the settlers and navigating the IDF, our group drives to a nearby community of cave dwellers in Soussia. These are Palestinians who farm the land, but cannot leave their cave/tents because, as I understand it, the Israelis would then confiscate their land and the settlers always are always poised to attack them.

We remove our shoes and enter the large central tent, lined with faded cushions, upon which were reclining our four Palestinian drivers and an elderly patriarch. They were gracious and welcoming, knew

several of the Israeli men with us, and served us tea in their main tent as chickens clucked around outside.

After nearly an hour, during which both groups remained in constant cell phone contact, we take our leave and return to the original roadblock/crossing to find five armored vehicles and three police cars. The activists re-engaged the military authorities, as we awaited the larger group to return from their hours long hike across a rocky and arduous terrain.

"Four children and two soldiers were injured," they report upon their return. "We managed to get the Palestinian ambulance through to take the kids for medical care."

This has been the third attack in two weeks and still no one involved has been arrested. One settler sicced his dog on the children and soldiers had to fire into the air. (The last time, Ha'aretz reported the following day, that people sicced dogs on children was in the America south of the 1960's.)

We all exhaustedly climb into our vans and begin back-- leaving a small group behind, in case the settlers are waiting for us to leave so they can continue their violent attacks on the children and the villagers, marking their havdallah by stoning children! We drive back towards Jerusalem, until suddenly at an intersection the van stops, a young Palestinian man runs towards us, energetic conversation ensues, and we are told we must change vans and travel on Palestinian roads, through two tunnels and a checkpoint in order to get into Jerusalem.

This bold protective action made the newspapers. Most of them don't.

Ha'aretz 5//8/2006

In another sign of rising tensions in the area, Jewish settlers from the Havat Maon settlement located south of Hebron hurled stones at Palestinian children twice on Saturday - once when the children were walking to school and once as they made their way home.

The children, long-time and frequent targets of settler attacks, were being escorted by Israel Defense Forces soldiers when they came under attack.

Two IDF soldiers and four Palestinian children were lightly injured in the clash.

IDF soldiers fired warning shots in the air in an effort to prevent the settlers' attacks. The IDF said the assailants fled to a nearby area of

brush and police forces were searching for them.

Some 50 left-wing activists were attempting to move from the village of Khirbet Al-Tawani, where the school is located, to the children's home village of Umm-Tuba. However, they said the IDF was preventing them from doing so after the area was declared a closed military zone.

An agreement was subsequently reached according to which an IDF medic would enter Umm-Tuba to examine the children said to have been hurt in the settlers' attacks.

The Maon settlers last week renewed their routine harassment of children from the Palestinian village of Khirbet Al-Tawani.

The IDF and police routinely provide a jeep in order to provide the Palestinian children protection from the settlers as they make their way to school.

In a later Ha'aretz report, the army says it does not have the resources to chase after the attackers and that the police are not around on Saturdays, when the "hilltop youth" visit the outpost and most of the incidents occur.

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For those of you who want further information and ways to become involved and supportive of this urgent work, I enclose a description of their mission.

#### Ta'ayush: A Short Description

An association of direct action, Ta'ayush (in Arabic "living together", "life in common"), was created at the early stages of the second Intifada, after the tragic events of October 2000, in which Israeli police killed 12 Israeli Arabs. In order to subvert the ethnic segregation and racist discrimination within Israel, the activists who founded Ta'ayush sought to develop forms of Arab-Jewish non-violent action from below - both in Israel itself and in the Occupied Territories.

To overcome political passivity, Ta'ayush activists have sought to go beyond the usual forms of political protest - the use of texts and symbols - and work within local communities on concrete projects that radicalize participants and their communities by making entrenched social structures and policies manifest. A typical project of this sort was last August's voluntary work camp, lasting 3 days, in which 500 Jewish and Palestinian volunteers paved a road and built a playground in an unrecognized Palestinian village within Israel, Dar el-Hanoun.

Since all construction works within such villages - which the state considers nonexistent and seeks to evacuate - is by definition illegal, activists have had to joint the villagers in defending what they had built together from demolition.

In its activities in the Occupied Territories, Ta'ayush has relied on its Arab-Jewish composition. Since December 2000, the group organized peace and solidarity convoys of food and medicines to besieged Palestinian villages, financed through donations by Jewish and Palestinians citizens of Israel. More than 10 such convoys - each comprising trucks and dozens of private cars - crossed the lines and overcame military checkpoints and harassment by soldiers and settlers. For local Palestinian communities, the convoys meant essential help and concrete solidarity. They also enabled thousands of Israelis who participated to witness some of the realities of the colonial war and spread it in their social milieus. Mass actions of this sort rely heavily on trust and cooperation between Ta'ayush and Palestinian activists in the West Bank. As the West Bank has gradually become a war zone, such non-violent mass actions gained in importance. Beyond providing a vehicle for protest against the bloody war, they have proved for many here that tenuous bridges of solidarity can be built, that a common future is possible.

The local networks created through the convoys have enabled Ta'ayush to play an essential role in the public campaign - initiated by a broad coalition of human rights associations - against the deportation of the Palestinian inhabitants of the South Hebron area ([www.southebron.tk](http://www.southebron.tk)). In this area, intended for annexation, half-nomadic cave dwellers face constant harassment by settlers and soldiers as part of a long-term government project for their evacuation. Ta'ayush activists organized mass delegations to the place, provided the inhabitants with food and water, and created a human belt enabling expelled inhabitants to return to their dwellings. They are still on their lands.