

Witness in Palestine The Twisted Easter-Egg Hunt

Sunday, March 27, 2005—Easter

Yesterday I left Bethlehem and continued south past Hebron to the village of At-Tawani, whose residents had appealed to IWPS for help with an action. Like Yanoun, At-Tawani has been repeatedly threatened and attacked by violent ideological settlers. Villagers' tractors have been ruined, their olives stolen, their wells poisoned with dead chickens, their sheep stabbed, and their children stoned. The Israeli government silently supports the settlers by subsidizing their settlements and by not condemning their illegal attacks on Palestinians. But the people of At-Tawani remain, in silent but determined resistance.

The illegal settlement of Ma'on is just over the hill from At-Tawani. Closer still is a small forest occupied by a new outpost. The children of At-Tawani and surrounding villages are frequently stoned by settlers as they pass the forest on their way to school. The youngsters now take a long detour road to avoid confrontation, but the settlers have started coming to the new road to harass the students. Instead of confronting the settlers and forcing them to stop, the army provides jeeps to ride alongside the children as they walk. The children have to run to keep up. They have learned that the army will protect them. They are too young to understand that these same people are also their oppressors.



At-Tawani village



The action that I participated in was not against the stoning of children but something even more shocking: In an effort to expel the villagers, settlers recently scattered the fields with poison to kill the sheep grazing there. They boiled barley seeds in anti-coagulant rat poison designed to spread through the body and cause excessive internal bleeding. According to *Amnesty International*, the particular poison that they used is illegal in Israel, except for government use.

The settlers know that villagers depend on their animals for food, and this is one more attempt to starve them out. Dozens of sheep are already dead or dying, along with other wildlife in the area. The ecologically disastrous nature of the settlers' action is testimony to their ignorance of the fragility of the land they claim is theirs.

I traveled to At-Tawani with a large group of Israelis and Palestinians from *Ta'ayush* to attempt the impossible: to remove every poisonous seed left by the settlers. We put on plastic gloves and masks and walked in a line across the landscape. The pellets were intentionally hidden under prickly shrubs where sheep graze, and we sat patiently, picking out the tiny pieces of death. It was an awful, endless job. Someone called it a "twisted Easter-egg hunt," since the next day was Easter Sunday and the poisonous seeds were egg-shaped and turquoise.



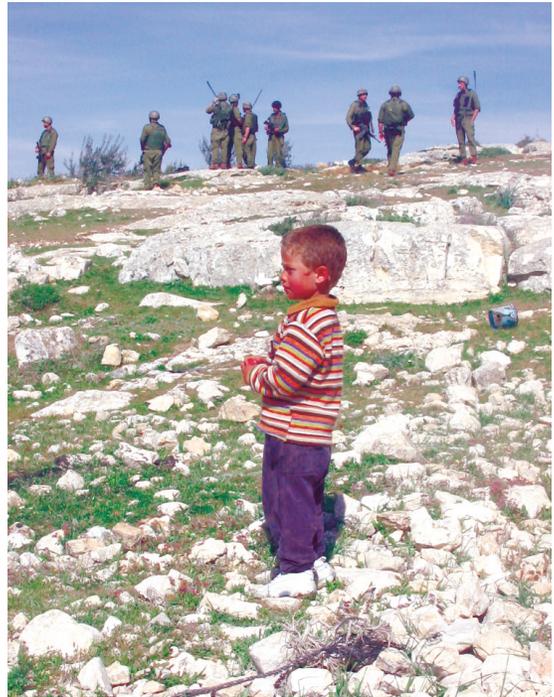
Israeli activists, international volunteers, and Palestinian villagers work together to remove poison from At-Tawani's land. Settlers placed barley seeds boiled in rat poison under shrubs with the intention of killing village sheep to discourage farmers from going to their land.



The army was stationed in At-Tawani yesterday to "protect" our official action from the settlers, but instead they only made our job harder. First they threatened the shepherds who were grazing sheep on a nearby hill. Although the land belongs to the villages, settlers have claimed it, rendering it a "disputed area." So the army has taken control and pronounced it a "closed military zone." The action was intentionally planned on a Saturday because on weekends the area is officially supposed to be open. But the soldiers told them to go to another area, where we were picking out poison. We insisted that the sheep couldn't graze there or they could be poisoned, but the soldiers didn't seem to care. They were worried about a confrontation between us and the settlers who had started to come out from the

trees. Atop the hill where we were working, more and more settlers emerged, watching and waiting.

The shepherds tried to protect their sheep, refusing to go down into the poisoned valley. The army grabbed one villager and arrested him. We were too far away to help him, but a member of *Ta'ayush* yelled for us to make groups around other shepherds and “hug them” if the army came close. I thought he was joking, but he wasn't. We surrounded the remaining shepherds, standing between them and the officers every time they tried to arrest another one. It worked! We used our bodies as shields, knowing that the soldiers would be more reluctant to use force against us than against the shepherds. The soldiers became tired of the game and grabbed a young boy. They held him, saying that he would only be released if we moved down. This time the shepherds were scared. They were willing to risk their own lives, but not that of a child. The whole group moved down and started to pick out poison frantically where the sheep were eating.



Soldiers prevent villagers from going to their land, forcing shepherd families to graze their sheep on land that was poisoned.

This wasn't enough for the settlers. They wanted us out altogether. The watching settlers formed a line, and for a moment we thought they were going to come down towards us. But they were smart; they knew our real weak spot.

The settlers turned and began to walk down the road towards the village, now lacking any international presence or army “protection.” We yelled at the soldiers to do something but they were clearly reluctant to confront the settlers. We began walking quickly towards the village, worried that we would not reach it before the settlers did. One settler left his group to walk down towards us, but the army stopped him. They didn't want a confrontation, at least not between the settlers and other Israelis. They seemed more worried about us than about the Palestinians.

The settler seemed annoyed that he had been stopped but cheered up when his comrades applauded as he returned to the group. He gave a little bow and they all laughed. Even the soldier was amused, and put his arm around the joker as if they were old friends. Meanwhile we hurried towards the village, having gained the lead during the interlude.

Once we were positioned between the settlers and the village, we sat down in a small group on the road. There were no more than 10 of us and at least 20 of them. The soldiers were anxious to avoid a confrontation, so they stood in front of us as if we were going to attack. We asked why they didn't stand in the way of the settlers, but we already knew the answer: this was easier.

When the settlers came close, my heart began to pound. They were singing a song for Purim, laughing and dancing in the street. Many of them were children. The Palestinian



Soldiers wishing to prevent a confrontation between violent settlers and Palestinian villagers or internationals often restrict the latter groups in order to avoid standing up to the settlers.

youth, on the other hand, were terrified. A woman from Operation Dove, an Italian peace team stationed in At-Tawani, began to sing “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” in Italian with the children to distract them. It was very effective, and I felt inspired by her creativity in making the situation less tense. The soldiers stood over us and sent the approaching settlers off to the side. Fortunately, they complied. They held hands and skipped off towards Ma’on settlement, leaving us all to catch our breath—soldiers included.

I tried to take photographs of the settlers but a soldier prevented me from doing so. I told him I thought it was important to document the situation, and I asked him what he was afraid of. I pointed out that he was the one with the gun, not me. He wasn’t listening. He just repeated “Go away” again and again, unwilling to even look at me. I was exasperated. I pleaded with him to look into my eyes so we could talk. I didn’t want to believe that someone could follow orders so blindly, so inhumanely. But he was lost in his world of “duty” and my words were in vain.

A filmmaker started to record my interaction with the soldier, and the soldier stopped him, too. The filmmaker asked why the soldier didn’t want him to film, and the soldier just kept his head down, repeating the same “Go away.” So I answered for him: “People who don’t want to be recorded are often ashamed on some level of what they’re doing.” I don’t know if he heard me or not.

We spent the rest of the afternoon sitting with the children from the village, hoping the settlers would not come back. They didn’t. At least not that day. But they’ve been back since, and they will be back again. The pellets we removed have been replaced by new poison, and either the villagers will give up their land or their sheep will continue to die. Of course, our action was less about removing the poison than attracting media attention to the incident. It was also about taking a stand; it was a symbol to the settlers that their actions are opposed and documented, and a symbol to the shepherds that we stand in solidarity with their fight to preserve their land and their lives.

