

Gaza – The World's Largest Prison

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During the last few months I have been privileged to have entered Gaza on two occasions on recent visits to the Holy Land. The first was during the Westminster Diocese Pilgrimage led by His Eminence Cardinal Vincent Nichols, when he took a day away from pilgrimage. I accompanied him and the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, His Beatitude Fouad Twal, on a day visit. It was the first time I had returned to this troubled area after the devastation caused by 51 days of war in July/August 2014. The damage to infrastructure and the impact on families is truly horrific.

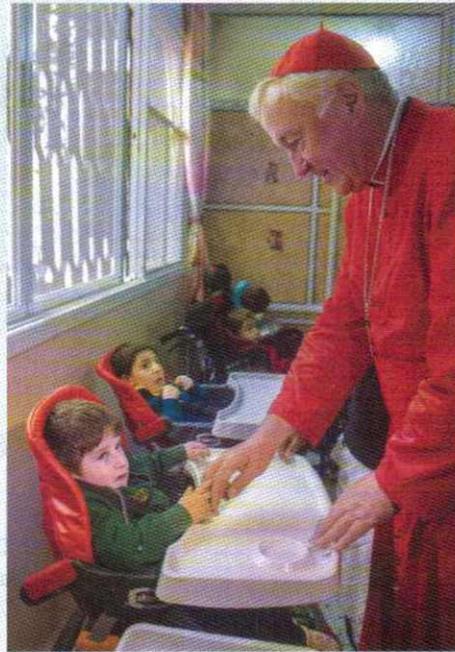
In an area 25 miles long by six miles wide, 1.9 million people live in the most densely populated country in the world. Christians number just 1,300, of whom 120 are 'Catholic' and the majority Greek Orthodox. Yet the contribution of Christian organisations is very considerable, running schools, a hospital and many other institutions serving the whole community. During our visit we met Sisters running the orphanage in the local Latin parish, where the Cardinal spent time in prayer with the young babies and children who had found refuge there from the rubble of their houses.

Fr Jorge

Friends of the Holy Land, an ecumenical and non-political Charity established five years ago, is committed to distributing 15% of our donations to support the Christians in Gaza. In the last few months this has been achieved through repairing the damage to nine of the 81 Christian households damaged in the conflict. That work is now complete under the direction of the Pontifical Mission Palestine and a full report can be seen on our website, www.friendsoftheholylan.org.uk under 'resources'. In addition, FHL has funded 75% of the cost of the 'Oratorio' Programme to provide psycho-social counselling to children in the Latin school to help them overcome the trauma of the conflict. The photograph shows funds for this programme being handed to Fr Jorge Hernandez, Parish Priest of the Holy Family Parish in Gaza. We are also supporting the families of 16 children at the Rosary Sisters School, paying their school fees for this year. This practical help

to individual named families is typical of FHL's work throughout the Holy Land.

On a lighter note, the visit of the most senior Cardinal to enter Gaza after the recent conflict caused great interest among the local media. The impressive figure of Fr Jorge was needed to bring our cavalcade of cars to a halt, to warn off local press who were happy to weave in and out to obtain the best photographs of the Cardinal and Latin Patriarch.



The Cardinal and the children

In January 2015 I visited Gaza again as an observer to the 'Coordination', an annual meeting of around 20 Archbishops, Bishops and Clergy from around the world who gather for five days to pray, experience the pilgrimage journey, demonstrate support through their presence and put pressure on their governments when they return home. Despite months of planning and applications for permits to enter Gaza for two days, it took seven hours for permission to be granted to cross the border at the Ezra Crossing. The impact of sung Morning Prayer outside the checkpoint with so many senior clerics was soon distributed around the world by the media team from the Catholic Bishops Conference of England & Wales, to great effect.

Once again, as we travelled around and spoke to local people, nothing prepared us

for what we saw and heard. The UN has estimated that about 18,000 housing units were destroyed or rendered uninhabitable, with a further 112,000 damaged. Entire neighbourhoods, particularly those adjacent to the border, have been destroyed. The impact of over 2,000 deaths, including 1,523 civilians, of which 519 were children, and thousands more injured, is unbelievable. Thousands of people are still displaced, water and sewage networks remain disrupted, and electricity is only operating at less than 30% of demand, with power outages of 18 hours daily. In the week we were there, three babies froze to death. Unfortunately a combination of red tape and political intervention has resulted in very little building material entering Gaza for the reconstruction to begin. Consequently 11 UN schools are still being used as shelters, with other schools operating on double- and sometimes triple-shifts in a day to provide education for the community.

Flattened

We visited one programme run by Catholic Relief Services that had made a significant difference in Shajaieh, a community near the border which had been flattened. They had erected a series of wooden 'shelters' – 30 so far, with 40 more this month – to provide a temporary home for families. These 'log cabins' did not require the steel and concrete that remained largely unobtainable at the time of our visit.

As I complete this article, Friends of the Holy Land are committed to continuing our support in Gaza in order to encourage the small Christian community there to stay. As with elsewhere in the Holy Land, the temptation to emigrate is greater with every passing day. However, with the help of Christians over here, FHL is able to make a real difference to hundreds of individual families in our four areas of support - education, employment, health and housing.

If you would like to know more of our work and how you can help, please email me at peter.rand@friendsoftheholylan.org.uk or contact me through the Directory (Kenilworth Circle). In the meantime, visit our website www.friendsoftheholylan.org.uk, and view our new film under 'resources', made in the Holy Land to tell the story of the Christian people there and why they need our help.