



International

Women Put Their Mark on MidEast Peace Efforts

Run Date: 04/26/07

By Brenda Gazzar
WeNews correspondent

Women are pushing the envelope on peace activism in the Middle East, with a nearly 30-country annual bike ride for peace that was followed within a few days by the shooting of a Nobel Prize-winning Irish peace activist at a West Bank demonstration.

ABU DIS, West Bank
(WOMENSENEWS)--"Freedom is Feminine."

That's the message Nida Awine chose to paint in large, Arabic script on the structure that Israeli officials call the "separation fence" or "security fence" and Palestinians often call the "apartheid wall."

Awine's handiwork appeared on the section of the structure located in this West Bank village that borders Jerusalem.



Nida Awine paints the separation wall.

Credit: Brenda Gazzar.

The towering cement structure was blank until Awine and other women painted it with political art, including a door bearing the words "To Be Opened" and a yellow sphere proclaiming "The Sun Will Rise 1 Day."

The Palestinian university student was one of about 350 women from nearly 30 countries who joined a third annual cycling tour for women through Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and the occupied West Bank that organizers hope is drawing attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to promote peace and freedom in the region.

Even Syrian first lady Asma al-Assad joined the women by cycling with them through her country.

This year's Follow the Women ride lasted 12 days and ended April 18, just a few days before well-known peace activist Mairead Corrigan, who shared the 1976 Nobel Peace Prize for her activism in the Northern Ireland civil conflict, attracted more attention to the barriers that have become symbolic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Corrigan was reportedly wounded by a rubber bullet on April 20, along with a number of other activists while protesting the separation barrier near Ramallah in the West Bank, according to local press reports. Two

Israeli border policemen were also injured by rock throwing from protesters. Organizers call these weekly protests nonviolent. Israeli officials say they regularly turn violent, with at least some participants hurling rocks with slingshots or even trying to cut down the barrier and Israeli forces responding with measures such as teargas, stun grenades and rubber bullets.

"This was a nonviolent protest that turned into violence. It's not right," said Naomi Chazan, a member of the steering committee of the International Women's Commission for a Just and Sustainable Israeli-Palestinian Peace and a former Israeli Parliament speaker. The state of the conflict of the moment "is more conflictual than one would like it to be. Even those who are fighting for peace find themselves in a conflictual situation."

Women Become Peacemakers

Grassroots and other women's initiatives around the world are becoming more directly involved with efforts to resolve the conflict, as the state of Israel celebrates its 59th birthday on April 24 and Palestinians commemorate their "naqba," or "disaster" in which at least half a million Palestinian refugees fled during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.

"I do not count on these politicians--men and women--to free my Palestine, my people," said Awine, 20, who was armed with a paintbrush dipped in red paint for the activity and who dreams of being a writer. "I count on the human beings, on the people, because these persons have the power, have the will, and know the value of living as a free human being."

Since the start of the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, in September 2000, nearly 4,040 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli security forces, mainly in the Occupied Territories, and 705 Israeli civilians and 316 Israeli security personnel have been killed by Palestinians through the end of March 2007, according to the Jerusalem-based B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories.

While more men than women have been killed in this conflict, women suffer in a broad range of indirect ways that can be further complicated by cultural mores, says Fabrizia Falcione, a women's human rights officer for UNIFEM, the United Nations Development Fund for Women.

Conflict's Heavy Burdens

For example, a Palestinian woman who is cut off from her land and thus her work by the separation wall, military checkpoints or through denial of permits, will have a more difficult time in finding another job than a man. "Very often, men allow women to go to cultivate their land" due to cultural restrictions on her mobility or expectations of acceptable roles for women. In Palestinian society "women don't have all the range of possibilities to have liberty of movement," Falcione said, "but that's the only job that they can do."

Falcione added that violence against women seems to be rising in the Occupied Territories because the conflict has weakened the rule of law and women's ability to seek and receive justice, a finding that echoes a 2006 Amnesty International report about Palestinian women and violence.

Since October 2006, the Israeli nongovernmental organization Isha L'Isha-Haifa Feminist Center has held a number of workshops and a conference in Haifa to foster alternative dialogues about women, peace and security that include the economic and emotional costs of conflict.

Last year, the group also trained women in Israel for conflict-resolution negotiations as outlined in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which urges member states to include more women at all decision-making levels for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict.

Call for Diplomacy

Using another tactic, the International Women's Commission, a body of prominent Israeli, Palestinian and international women working for a just and sustainable Israeli-Palestinian peace, has recently called on Israel and the international community to normalize relations with the new Palestinian government.



Women break a barrier at a March protest against Israel's separation wall.

Credit: Guo Lei/Xinhua/MPN.

When the Islamist group Hamas won a majority in the Palestinian Legislative Council in 2006 but refused to recognize the state of Israel or renounce violence, the United States and many European countries cut off all funds to the Palestinian National Authority.

In March, Hamas and the secular Fatah--which had previously maintained power as the ruling party for 12 years--formed a new unity government in a thus-far unsuccessful effort to end international sanctions. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has boycotted the new government for the same reasons but is involved in a new round of talks with moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in an effort to revive the stalled peace process.

"We believe that without negotiations--without talking to the Palestinian government--nothing is going to move," said Palestinian-Israeli Aida Touma-Suleiman, a member of the International Womens' Commission steering committee.

The commission, formed under the auspices of UNIFEM to implement Resolution 1325, will hold its first local conference in Jerusalem on May 13 and 14. The conference will raise two main issues: getting peace negotiations back on track and integrating women into negotiations, Touma-Suleiman said.

Brenda Gazzar is a freelance journalist based in Jerusalem.

Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at editors@womensenews.org.

For more information:

Follow the Women:

<http://www.followthewomen.com/>

"Israeli Women Challenge Meaning of Security":

<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3037/>

"Jewish and Arab Women Unite Against War":

<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2850/>

Note: Women's eNews is not responsible for the content of external Internet sites and the contents of Web pages we link to may change without notice.

Send this story to a friend.

Your Name:

Friend's Email:

To Obtain Permission to Reprint or Repost This Article :



For Complete Step-by-Step Instructions: [Reprint FAQs](#)

Copyright 2006 Women's eNews. The information contained in this Women's eNews report may--with the prior written authorization of Women's eNews--be published, broadcast, rewritten or otherwise distributed.

Women's eNews is a nonprofit independent news service covering issues of concern to women and their allies. An incubator program of the International Institute for Community Solutions, Fund for the City of New York, Women's eNews is supported by our readers; reprints and licensing fees; and the Carnegie Corporation of New York; the International Institute for Community Solutions, Fund for the City of New York; the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation; the Barbara Lee Family Foundation; the Open Society Institute; the Rockefeller Family Fund; The Helena Rubinstein Foundation; the Sister Fund and the Starry Night Fund. The donations from readers are critical to our success. Donate now by going to <http://www.womensenews.org/support.cfm>.

Women's eNews subscribers may select whether to receive a daily full text, daily summary or weekly summary. To change your email address, send mail to membersvcs@womensenews.org. To change the frequency of your mail or to cancel your subscription, send a message to Member Services (membersvcs@womensenews.org) or use our online form: http://www.womensenews.org/update_subscription.cfm

[Home](#) [About Us](#) [Donate](#) [Arabic Women's eNews](#) [Press Release](#) [Sylvia](#) [Links](#) [Contact us](#)
[Search Archives](#) [Subscription and Membership](#) [Pressroom](#) [Help](#)

21 LEADERS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

[REPRINT FAQs](#)

[Make Us Your Homepage!](#)

[sign in](#)

Copyright 2007 Women's eNews Inc.