"We want bridges, not walls!"



The Salesian Sisters in Cremisan near Beit Jala are in danger of losing their educational compound. The Israeli army plans to build the separation wall through the land of the convent. This would be the end of the kindergarten, school, afternoon classes, summer camps, and center for children with learning disabilities, which are run by the nuns on the compound.

Although the army has suggested additionally an alternative route for the wall, both options will eventually shutter the nun's mission.

The nuns are passionate about their work with the local children. For over 50 years, the young people of the community have been the sisters' principle focus. "We want to build bridges, not walls. We are committed towards education for justice, peaceful living and peace between all peoples without distinction", says Sr. Fides, the directress at Cremisan. Since 1960 the Salesian sisters have been developing the institution to serve the needy children of the neighboring Palestinian villages. The presence of the nuns is a blessing for the local population. Children who come to the convent for afternoon classes and summer camps would otherwise spend their free time on the streets because their families cannot afford to send them elsewhere. Regrettably, the valuable work of the Convent is endangered by the planned wall. "We don't want the wall!"

In 2006, the Israeli occupation forces issued orders to seize land from the sisters to build the separation wall between Israel and the West Bank. In all contacts with the army the sisters said clearly: "We don't want the wall at all, neither on our right side nor on our left side, not in front of

the convent or behind it." In 2010, when they found out that their wishes were distorted by the army, they approached the Society of St. Yves, the Catholic Center for Human Rights, with their case.

St. Yves and the sisters joined an appeal against the wall that was lodged by the Palestinian neighbors of the convent, who are also in danger to lose their land. In its submissions to court, the army suggested two different routes for the wall around the convent. "Both suggestions completely ignore the fact that the wall would be a harsh violation of the texture of life of nuns, staff, children and families in the area", explains Manal Hazan-Abu Sinni, the advocate in charge of the case. "Eventually both suggestions proposed by the army will harm and jeopardize the educational work of the school."

No real choice

The first proposal suggested by the army is to leave the convent and school buildings on the Palestinian side of the wall, but cut the sisters off from the rest of their land. The nuns would have access to their land on the Israeli side of the wall through an agricultural gate, which would be opened only during certain periods of the year.

In order to keep the convent on the Palestinian side, an eight meter high concrete wall would be built around the current fence of the compound, blocking the view and creating a prison like atmosphere. Children who attend the school would have to use the street that the army also uses for patrolling the wall – in effect, the children would be in contact with armed soldiers every day to come to their locked-in school.

As the wall would cut the convent off from the rest of its land, it would make using the land for educational activities impossible. Furthermore, the school, which provides vital educational and extra-curricular services, would have no land available for continued expansion. But the school has been growing, and future building is necessary and inevitable.

The second proposal is to build the separation wall in front of the convent, leaving the educational compound and additional land entirely on the Israeli side of the wall. Thus the convent would be cut off from the community it serves.

Practically this second alternative is equally untenable since it would require a guarded gate to be built at the entrance of the school compound. The gate would be opened at specific times to allow military supervised passage of children, teachers and convent staff. All of them will require permits to pass through this gate – to reach their school and workplace. The parents of the children have made it clear that they will not send their children to the school if they must pass through a gate guarded by soldiers.

Children have a right to education

Palestinian children have a right to go to school. It is increasingly clear that education can empower young people to rise above their current situation, which is crippled by the demolition of homes, military incursions, increased violence, and poverty. It is unacceptable that school children daily have to pass a checkpoint staffed by soldiers to practice their right to education. The goal should be to remove as many barriers as possible for children to receive an education.

The court is to issue its final judgment in November, until then we remain with the words of wisdom which greet the comers to the Silesian school in Cremisan, engraved in stone: "There will come a day without borders when the only passport will be the heart."