

The Impact of Israeli Policies of Siege and Closures, including the Siege and Re-occupation of Ramallah, on the Living Environment of Birzeit Town

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June 1st, 2002

Introduction

The Israeli reoccupation of Palestinian cities, towns and villages on March 29th, 2002 came as arguably the most aggressive of Israeli measures against Palestinians since the start of the second Palestinian uprising (al-Aqsa *Intifada*) on September 28th, 2000. Since the beginning of the uprising, more than 1700 Palestinians have been killed and over 20,000 have been injured. In addition, thousands of buildings have been destroyed and agricultural land has been uprooted and leveled¹.

Since September 28th, 2000, numerous sieges have been imposed on the Palestinian population, effectively separating the West Bank and Gaza Strip into 64 pieces and 3 clusters. At the most extreme states of siege, these areas have been divided into 120 clusters². The result was a situation where people encountered great hardships, and sometimes danger, to reach their work, schools, or medical care facilities. Severe economic recession ensued, and Palestinian households have become increasingly impoverished due to loss of work and sources of income. It is estimated that 47% of Palestinians are now living below the poverty line³. Moreover, the provision of services and the development of environmental health related infrastructure, including water supply, wastewater, and solid waste disposal have been negatively affected⁴.

While most attention has focused on the deaths, injuries, and destruction of infrastructure, the impact of the Israeli measures on the population's daily life has been covered less extensively. It is believed that, even in areas far from direct confrontation and attack, daily life has become extremely difficult, and the environment and environmental health services have been affected in ways that are likely to have longer-term consequences on health.

¹ For more information on the impact of the Israeli measures, see Palestine Monitor at <http://www.palestinemonitor.org>

² Palestine Monitor, Intifada Fact Sheets: The Effect of Closure on Health Care in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (27 May 2002)

³ PCBS. Impact of Israeli Measures on the Economic Conditions of Palestinian Households. April 2001.

⁴ Personal communication with the Palestinian Ministry of Environmental Affairs, Palestinian Hydrology Group, and different municipalities of the West Bank.

This report describes the impact of Israeli measures on the town of Birzeit since the beginning of the second *Intifada* up until the reoccupation of the West Bank on March 29th, 2002. It includes impacts on environmental and health services, education, economy and social life. Where information is available, the situation in Birzeit during the siege and re-occupation of Ramallah is described. Data collection consisted of interviews with key informants and personnel working in the town institutions, university students and town residents, as well as personal observations.

Birzeit prior to the Al-Aqsa *Intifada*

The town of Birzeit is situated 10 kilometers north of Ramallah city. It is surrounded by 'Atara village from the north, the villages of Abu Shkhedem and Abu Qash from the south, Jifna from the east, and al-Mazra'a al-Gharbieh from the west. Its population is estimated at 5,000, about 2,500 of whom are natives of Birzeit. There are about 1000 refugees residing in Birzeit Refugee camp in the middle of the town and more than 1,000 of Birzeit University students and staff ⁵. The main economic activities are commerce and service sectors in addition to limited industrial activities, including stone cutting, block and tiles manufacturing, and pharmaceuticals. The presence of Birzeit University (first in the heart of the town and then later at a small distance from it) has contributed to the development and urbanization of the town. Businesses have developed around students' and staff's needs for food, accommodation, and other services. Nevertheless, the town relies on the Ramallah/al-Bireh urban center for work, shopping, health care, and recreation.

Birzeit is located in what is called area B, which is under Palestinian administrative authority, yet still under Israeli security authority. Birzeit has been connected to the public water network since the early 1970s. The Jerusalem Water Undertaking is responsible for the construction and management of the network that provides most of Ramallah district areas. Like most Palestinian areas, the town relies on septic tanks and cesspits for wastewater disposal as it lacks sewerage network and wastewater collection and treatment facilities. Birzeit municipality manages solid waste collection and disposal. A solid waste disposal site lies near 'Atara village.

Electricity network in Birzeit is managed by the Jerusalem Electricity Company. Telecommunication and the telephone network are under the management of the Palestinian Telecommunications Company. There have been substantial improvements in the network since the coming of the Palestinian Authority as most of the homes and organizations could get telephone lines in addition to the growing cellular phone network.

Birzeit has a primary health care center managed by Birzeit Women's Charitable Society, and students receive medical care at the University clinic. However, most of the population of Birzeit and that of the surrounding villages rely on governmental and private medical care in Ramallah and al-Bireh cities.

⁵ Birzeit Municipality

As for recreational facilities, three open swimming pools in the town receive people from Birzeit and surroundings as well from Ramallah and al-Bireh cities in the summer time. Birzeit Town is also the home of an annual arts and culture festival that brings performing artists from around the world to Palestinian audiences. The cultural life is mainly based in the University that has moved outside the heart of the town and is now situated at its outskirts. However, until the beginning of the *Intifada*, university students residing in Birzeit used to bring life to the otherwise calm evenings of small towns and villages of Birzeit's size.

Birzeit and surroundings in the *Intifada*

Although the town of Birzeit was not subject to direct attacks by the Israeli Defense Force during the past 19 months, the Ramallah siege and the repeated closures of the main Ramallah-Birzeit road since June 2001 have negatively affected the life of the population and the provision of basic services⁶.

Infrastructure and environmental health services

Water, wastewater and solid waste disposal

Since the closure of the main road to Ramallah in June 2001 it became impossible for collection tanks to reach al-Bireh wastewater treatment plant to dispose wastewater. Wastewater is disposed of in the open valleys at the boundaries of the town, causing foul smells and posing a public health hazard as it creates breeding sites for insects and rodents as well as the potential for groundwater to be polluted. In fact, the municipality has received complaints regarding this problem from residents living close to these valleys, but the problem is still unresolved. In periods of strict siege, even wastewater collection tankers privately owned by people living in surrounding villages cannot reach Birzeit, leaving septic tanks to flood and wastewater to run within residential areas.

Solid waste disposal was not possible on a regular basis due to the closure of the road to the disposal site in 'Atara since the beginning of the *Intifada*. In an attempt to solve the problem, Birzeit municipality made an agreement with Jifna village council to dispose its waste in Jifna site, but that site is relatively small to receive the amounts of waste from Birzeit. Jifna village council members complain about this arrangement, but they state that there is no other solution for Birzeit waste disposal. It is noteworthy that both the solid and liquid wastes of Birzeit's pharmaceutical factory are handled like other municipal waste, as it is not possible to reach the treatment plant in al-Bireh or the dumpsite in Ramallah.

⁶ Birzeit- Ramallah road closure due to Ramallah siege:

6 June 2001: Closure of the road and digging it at the beginning of Surda village. No one was allowed to pass through the checkpoint in a vehicle, and people had to cross the checkpoint on foot.

18 October – 7 November 2001: Total closure of Ramallah after the Israeli Tourism Minister was killed in Jerusalem. No one was allowed to use the main Ramallah- Birzeit road.

2 December – 20 December: Closure of the road after two operations where the Israeli soldiers were attacked and 19 killed at Ein Arik and Eune al Haramieh checkpoints

12 – 17 March, 2002: First reoccupation of Ramallah

29th March – 23rd April: Second reoccupation of Ramallah

Birzeit and its surrounding villages did not suffer as much from consecutive water supply cuts as other areas during the *Intifada*. The main water pipeline supplying Birzeit was damaged in June 2001 when the Israeli army dug up the main road in Surda to cut the main Ramallah- Birzeit road. The water supply was again cut off for several days in Birzeit after the Ramallah reoccupation on March 29th 2002, when the main water pumping station and the pipeline supplying Birzeit were hit and damaged by the Israeli army.

Mobility of residents

The repetitive closure of the main Birzeit-Ramallah road has made movement for Birzeit residents and residents of surrounding villages quite difficult and risky. People have had to use an alternative road and frequently, tracks and paths through wadis and hills via Jifna , Ein Senia to Jalazone refugee camp to reach Ramallah and other localities to the east and south. This included the movement of sick people and school children as well as those who go to jobs outside their villages.

Health and Medical Care

Main road closures and checkpoints made it difficult, sometimes impossible, for sick people needing medical care to reach Ramallah. The primary care clinic in Birzeit was the main medical care provision facility, not only for Birzeit residents, but for residents of surrounding villages as well. The number of ill people coming to the clinic increased to the extent that on days of complete closure of the main Ramallah Birzeit Road and closure of 'Atara road there were 30 patients per day compared to less than five when the road was open. The clinic lacks medical equipment needed for secondary care. Vaccination programs suffered from repetitive interruption as the person responsible for giving vaccines lives in Um Saffa, a village close to Birzeit, and could not come for many times due to the closure of the road from 'Atara to Birzeit. In the re-occupation period vaccination was impossible.

Patients with chronic diseases including diabetes, hypertension, asthma, kidney failure (needing dialysis) and other chronic diseases could not get the medical care they needed at all. The lab technician was trapped in Ramallah during re-occupation periods, so even the basic clinical tests for such patients were impossible. We have no information on the potential complications suffered by those patients during such periods. Six cases of bone fracture were treated by a general practitioner in the clinic during the first reoccupation period as reaching an orthopedic doctor was impossible.

The clinic was the only refuge for women in labor to deliver their babies, although it is not equipped as a maternity room. Fortunately, there is a resident gynecologist in Birzeit. During the first reoccupation of Ramallah (March 12 -16 2002) 9 women coming from villages surrounding Birzeit delivered at the clinic. However, they were unable to stay for more than two to three hours at the clinic, because of the road conditions and the fear of being separated from their families in these uncertain times. In one case, the delivery took place at 20:30, and the mother had to go back to her village 'Atara almost by midnight on foot with the risk of being shot at or attacked. During the second reoccupation of Ramallah (March 29 – April 22), 34 women

delivered their babies at the Birzeit clinic, and in one case the newborn died due to insufficient equipment and absence of a pediatrician.

The clinic and other pharmacies in the town suffered from lack of medications especially those needed for chronic disease patients. The clinic also suffered from lack of oxygen bottles and even basic dressing materials.

Food and other supplies

As in other communities, the people of Birzeit adjusted their food and other basic item transport into town to suit the presence of what seems to be a permanent Israeli Army roadblock beginning June 2001 and continuing up till the time of writing this report. Since June of 2001, shopkeepers have been transporting food and basic supplies from Ramallah but are forced to carry these items on foot at the checkpoints then move them to another vehicle behind the checkpoint, adding to the cost of purchasing food and other basic items. In the summertime, cold meat or dairy products are exposed to potential spoilage, and in the winter, food products are subject to wetting from the rain.

During the period of reoccupation of Ramallah (March 29th), it was almost impossible for shopkeepers to bring food into Birzeit during the first week. Some items such as milk and dairy products as well as fruits and vegetables were missed from the market. However, by the second week food was brought from Jericho, although not regularly, and again, transported via alternative tracks. The time to get food from Jericho to Birzeit took ten hours in some cases in ordinary non-refrigerated vehicles leading to food spoilage and increasing the risk of food poisoning. Some shopkeepers could not sell those foods by the time they arrived to Birzeit. Food transport cost increased dramatically, and that was naturally reflected on the prices of foods bought in Birzeit. Given that the Ramallah second re-occupation occurred just before the end of the month, household breadwinners could not get their salaries and were out of cash. Consequently, many could not afford buying foods for higher prices and were obliged to reduce the household food consumption and look for cheaper food items.

Education

*Schools*⁷

There are 1811 students studying in the five schools of Birzeit. Especially in the secondary schools, students come from surrounding villages. Since the beginning of the Al-Aqsa *Intifada*, around one third of the teachers were not able to reach their schools on the days of total road closure. Around one fourth of students were not able to reach schools when the road from their village to Birzeit was closed. Such interruptions made it difficult for the education process to proceed with any regularity. Teachers reported psychosomatic symptoms emerging among students as well as a notable increase in violent behaviors. Although Birzeit town and its surrounding villages were not reoccupied, schools closed down throughout the period

⁷ Interviews with head teachers of 5 schools in Birzeit.

of Ramallah reoccupation. Actually, it was felt to be dangerous to go to schools at that time as any area was at risk of being re-occupied. After April 22nd, 2002, schools reopened but still teachers report that students come to school afraid and feeling insecure. However, we have no idea of the extent of psychosomatic symptoms and psychological problems among students. A few female students from the secondary school dropped out due to the situation as reported by the head teacher.

*Birzeit University*⁸

Since the beginning of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* and the closure of the roads, the University has lost more than 120 working days. This not only interrupted the academic process, but also other activities such as training programs and continuing education. Due to the economic recession, more than 200 students were not able to pay the tuition fees, thus increasing the financial burden on the University. Students from the northern and southern regions of the West Bank were unable to reach the university regularly. Even students living in Ramallah villages were often not able to reach the university due to checkpoints and closures. The University rents a residence in Ramallah for staff living in the northern and southern regions of the West Bank. In order to come to their work, those staff members are obliged to leave their families for weeks until the road conditions are relatively safe for travel. A number of them were trapped in Ramallah in the reoccupation periods with no way to communicate with their families living in other reoccupied cities of Nablus and Jenin. The Gaza students had to remain in Birzeit since the beginning of the *Intifada* unable to reach their families.

Students, particularly those who stayed at Birzeit during the invasion periods of Ramallah, could not receive the money that their families used to send for them, and many were out of cash. Some students reported that they did not have money even to buy bread. Students who had some cash shared it with those who had not, and some of the Birzeit residents helped. Shopkeepers extended students credit to buy food until they were able to repay their debts.

During the period of Ramallah second reoccupation Birzeit was reoccupied on April 12th 2002 for one day. The Israeli army arrested 11 of the university students living in Birzeit. They attacked male and female residents. It was an extremely frightening experience, especially for female students who were forced out of the residence at 5:00 am and saw their male colleagues kneeling on the ground with guns to their heads.

Since the beginning of the *Intifada*, the university students showed a diversity of psychosomatic symptoms of nightmares, sleeplessness, loosing or increasing appetite, headache and other organ pains as shown in a survey done by the Institute of Community and Public Health at the University. Students reported fear and uncertainty of future. With interrupted teaching days, students are under increased pressure to complete their studies under this traumatic situation. Most of them want to graduate, as their families are not able to afford their fees and living expenses any longer.

⁸ Personal communication with Public Relations Office- Birzeit University

Industry and economic activities

Since the beginning of the *Intifada*, the stonecutting and tile factories in Birzeit suffered severe losses as all the construction activities decreased. Moreover, it became difficult to get the raw materials needed for production⁹. More than half of the workers (25) were fired due to recession. During the reoccupation period the work of these factories stopped totally and two may now have to close.

The Birzeit Pharmaceutical factory had been able to function at its regular capacity till October 18th 2001 (after the Israeli Tourism Minister Zaeivi was killed), when Ramallah was placed under siege and consequently Birzeit and its surroundings. After that date, the production declined to almost one third¹⁰. During the Ramallah reoccupation periods, the factory was working with limited capacity, as the workers were not able to reach their workplace. Products are stored in the factory store as marketing and distribution are quite difficult under the present circumstances.

Recreational facilities in Birzeit and adjacent Jifna village, including 5 swimming pools and 5 restaurants were not able to operate since the beginning of the Intifada leaving the owners and staff with no options for work and income.

Conclusion

Although Birzeit and its surrounding villages were not directly or dramatically exposed to the Israeli aggressive measures compared to other Palestinian areas, yet the impact of the overall situation, particularly the closure of roads and siege made life extremely difficult for the population. Infrastructure and basic services may not have been suspended completely, but they were interrupted, especially during the siege and reoccupation of Ramallah and other areas in the West Bank.

The description of the living environment during the *Intifada* and especially during the Ramallah reoccupation shows that no area is excluded from the impacts of Israeli aggression against Palestinians. Such communities as Birzeit would need assistance in ensuring safe food supplies coming to the town and urgent supplies for impoverished households who lost their income either as a result of the general economic recession in Palestinian areas or as a result of inability to reach their work due to closures and siege. There is also a need for assistance in developing medical and health care provision to meet the needs of emergency situations. Birzeit University students and staff must be able to reach their classes and work safely and without humiliation. These demands cannot be met unless the siege, closures, and occupation end.

⁹ Interviews with stonecutting and tile factory owners November 2001, April 2002.

¹⁰ Interview with Birzeit Pharmaceutical Company administration- November 2001, April 2002.