

# Eyewitness to land grab and brutality

**T**HIS year, while Israel has been celebrating the 40th anniversary of its victory in the Six Day War, which saw its land size effectively triple, Palestinians have been left contemplating the fact that their territory has been reducing in size ever since.

The number of Israeli settlements being built in the West Bank and East Jerusalem has continued to grow, despite assurances by the Israeli government to the contrary. Israel's 703-kilometre West Bank separation barrier has similarly encroached on Palestinian land and restricted access to neighbouring villages and roads.

Even Palestinian victories regarding land disputes in the Israeli Supreme Court – of which there are only three – may be largely pyrrhic. On September 4 this year, the Israeli Supreme Court ordered the government to redraw the path of the wall because the current route was “highly prejudicial” to the 1,800 residents of a West Bank village called Bil'in. This lies halfway between Yaffa and Jerusalem and is among the villages which fall under the governorate of Ramallah, Palestine's unofficial capital 16 kilometres to the east.

While the Israeli Defence Ministry has indicated that it will respect the Supreme Court's decision, a subsequent ruling may mean it does not need to. The next day, September 5, in a second decision that received little media coverage outside Israel, the Supreme Court ruled that the Israeli settlement of Mattiyahu East, built on a large portion of Bil'in's land to the west of the separation wall, was legal. This was despite significant evidence of its illegality, even under Israeli law and the previous day's ruling. The court said that petitions against the settlement should have been filed several years earlier.

As a result, the court has apparently approved the maintenance of the status quo in the area. The existing part of the neighbourhood will remain in place, but plans to expand it will not be carried out – at least not yet.

Over the past 25 years, Bil'in has seen Israeli settlers chip away at its land until it is less than half its original size. In 1981 English-speaking immigrants from the United States established the Matityahu settlement, a type of co-operative agricultural community (“moshav”). It still consists of only 65 families (1,400 people), although the settlement is hoping to expand and add another carefully selected 250 families to the community. Ten years later, another portion of land was confiscated on which the Kiryat Sefer (also referred to as Modi'in Illit) settlement was built. It is the largest Israeli settlement in the West Bank with 40,000 inhabitants. In 2002, yet another new settlement was built – Matityahu East – this time without permission.

In April 2004, the Israeli government announced its intention to route the



**Neil Hodge** has seen for himself the effects on Palestinians of Israel's brutal annexation of their territory



A BOY waves the Palestinian flag beside the barrier which cuts the village of Bil'in in half. Pic: Neil Hodge

separation barrier through the village and effectively split it in half. Less than a year later, on February 20 2005, Israeli army bulldozers began work on constructing the wire fence, completing it in April 2006. The barrier now goes round the village at a length of two kilometres, a breadth of 30 metres and is five kilometres inside the “green line” – the supposedly legal border separating the West Bank and the lands occupied by Israel in 1948. It has caused 60 per cent of the village's land to pass to the Israeli administered side of the fence and effectively into the hands of the settlers.

The village council says that around 1,000 olive trees, the life-blood of the community, have been uprooted and destroyed to make way for this wall which separates the citizens from their own land and orchards. Most of the village's land

(230 hectares) lies west of (meaning inside of) the wall and is planted with between 100,000-150,000 olive trees. The rest of the land is used for sowing seeds and grain, planting vegetables and sometimes as grazing land for livestock. Villagers can only access the land through a gate controlled by Israeli soldiers, who may – or may not – allow them to pass.

The land that has remained on the eastern side of the wall (170 hectares) is less fertile and is also used for housing. The section of land nearest the wall has since become barren and its use for residential purposes is forbidden, thereby creating a shortage of accessible farmland for the villagers. As a result, many have been forced to buy land from neighbouring villages or move to the cities or abroad. Since the fence was

completed, unemployment in the village has soared. The majority of adult males living there are now unemployed.

Checkpoints set up around the village have also made it more difficult for villagers to tend their crops, sell produce or commute to areas where they might be able to work. Permission to travel into Israel is regularly denied and the villagers are often placed under curfew with the army often declaring Bil'in to be a closed military zone.

Since January 2005, the village has been a testament to the unfairness of the settlement programme and a beacon of resistance. At noon each Friday, demonstrators from the village meet outside of the mosque and head towards the barrier. The number of demonstrators varies from one week to the next: sometimes there are more than 100 protesters; on other occasions there are only a few dozen. But there are always dozens of Israeli soldiers waiting for them, armed with batons, tear gas and stun grenades, and rifles capable of shooting rubber bullets or live rounds.

The protests are barely tolerated. Israeli soldiers are positioned well inside Palestinian land and no one is allowed near the wire fence. Razor wire is routinely spread across the road at least 100 metres from the barrier and tear gas rounds are fired off within minutes of arrival, with little provocation. For the Israelis, it is a chance to fine-tune anti-demonstration techniques and take pot-shots at anyone who gets too close or lingers for too long – with the added benefit of not being held directly responsible for their injuries.

On several occasions, soldiers have distributed leaflets urging residents not to participate in the protests and not to leave their homes at all on Fridays. Children have been detained during night-time raids. Villagers say the army has used undercover agents known as "musta'ribeen" (agent provocateurs who act, speak and look like Palestinians) to take part in demonstrations and encourage stone-throwing at soldiers so that the army can justify its use of force. However, while the villagers may not condone stone throwing, they do not condemn it.

While the weekly protesters routinely suffer from the burning, nauseous effects of the tear gas fired at them at close range, on average three or four demonstrators each week are injured by rubber bullets. These are essentially rubber-coated ball-bearings weighing about the same as a one-pound coin which maim or even kill. One Italian activist was shot in the forehead with a rubber bullet on my last visit, as Israeli soldiers tried to disperse some Palestinians who were using slingshots against them as they approached through the olive groves. Fortunately, he survived. The previous week I was there, a female activist had a rubber bullet lodged in her thigh which had to be prised out with a penknife.

Several villagers bear similar battle scars. One regular demonstrator has a permanent one-inch dent in his forehead where he was shot with a rubber bullet. Eyad Burnat, head of Bil'in's committee to protest against the wall, says he has been injured nearly 30 times by baton charges and rubber bullets in the past two years. Others have been less fortunate. One villager is now paralysed but still participates in protests in a wheelchair.



## Ireland eye John Coulter

# Left behind without broad socialist front

**N**ORTHERN Ireland is likely to become a very crowded political market for the left in 2008, with right-wing parties set to triumph unless a broad socialist front is formed. After decades of banging their heads against a brick wall, socialists in the north of Ireland have finally got the message across to the British Labour Party that the province could have potentially rich pickings at local council, Assembly and even Westminster levels.

Before the Ulster Unionist Party severed its official links with the Tories over Margaret Thatcher's decision in 1985 to sign the Anglo-Irish Accord, the Conservative and Unionist Party was the largest movement in Northern Ireland.

British Labour always used to dismiss Northern Irish socialists by telling them to join its so-called sister party, the moderate nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party.

But the SDLP wanted a united Ireland, so many pro-Union socialists felt alienated. However, with the SDLP losing the top nationalist spot to the IRA's political wing, Sinn Fein, Northern Ireland could yet yield a political harvest for Labour.

Since 2005, the SDLP has just about avoided electoral meltdown, prompting nationalists in the Republic of Ireland to campaign for a merger with the Dail's largest government partner, Fianna Fail.

The left-leaning Fianna Fail is now organising in Northern Ireland and hopes to contest elections by 2009. Last month, the Dublin-based Irish Labour Party – one of Ireland's oldest political movements – gave the green light to fighting elections north of the border.

First Minister Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party – in spite of past hardline right-wing rhetoric on the Union – is essentially a working-class labour movement when it comes to economic issues. As the rival Ulster Unionist Party bids to find a new identity after being repeatedly trounced at the polls by the DUP, the internal Unionist Labour group is again flexing its muscles in an attempt to gain control of the UUP's ruling Ulster Unionist Council.

As the Executive at Stormont appears to be stable, the peace process has steadily shifted Northern Ireland's politics. Voters are more focused on their standards of living than the north-south divide. With the Labour Party losing ground to the nationalists in Scotland and Wales and the revamped Tories in England, Gordon Brown is well advised to join the fight for seats in Northern Ireland.

The only thing making him hesitate is the fate of the Tories in the province.

After the UUP split in the early 1990s, Northern Irish Tories succeeded in getting permission from the Conservative Party conference to contest elections. But almost two decades since the recognition campaign began, the Tories are on the verge of electoral oblivion in Northern Ireland.

Before the Troubles erupted in the late 1960s, the former Northern Ireland Labour Party was the left's main challenge to the ruling Unionist establishment.

Working-class Protestants have faced an uphill struggle to advance a socialist agenda because of their parties' associations with loyalist terror gangs. The Progressive Unionists are linked to the UVF and Red Hand Commandos, while the Ulster Political Research Group has links to the UDA/UFF.

It needs the Labour Party to organise in the north of Ireland to lay to rest the perception that labour politics is dominated by loyalist and republican paramilitaries.

But with so many left parties set to use next year as a launching pad for elections in 2009, the risk is a fragmented socialist vote and right-wing victories in European and local council elections and a possible general election.

Talk of election pacts has been the prerogative of Unionists and Republicans in the past, but socialists will have to adopt agreed candidates under a broad left front if they are to make significant gains. While manifestos, policies and campaigns are important, the aim must be to ensure that winnable working-class seats are not lost because of a cluttered ballot paper. To attract Roman Catholic voters, a broad left front must put socialism before nationalism in order to bring in substantial numbers of working-class Protestants. It must develop the concept of patriotic socialism.

At Stormont, the two main political designations are currently Unionist or Nationalist. If Gordon Brown survives as Prime Minister after the next general election and his party starts to organise in Northern Ireland, then that could change within a decade.

Then – and only then – can sectarianism be confined to the dustbin of history. Meanwhile, only a broad left front has the electoral capability of defeating the growing racist menace in Northern Ireland as the numbers of those from an ethnic minority background continue to increase.

The ultimate goal should be an all-island organised labour movement holding power in both sovereign states. Now is time for the left to stand up before it can walk, let alone run.