Around Europe
Quaker Council for European Affairs
No. 281 April 2006

Soldiers quit 'War of Aggression'

On 14 March 2006, the Intergroup for Peace Initiatives held a hearing in the European Parliament in Strasbourg. The focus was evidence from soldiers who have refused to participate in the war in Iraq, either directly or indirectly, because they consider this to be an illegal war.

Referring to the war in Iraq, George Solomou, formerly of the Royal Medical Corps (UK forces) said: 'This is not a war, this is a war crime'. In his research he had found 100s of reasons why this war is in breach of international law. He reflected, holding up his Royal Medical Corps cap, that joining the corps had been one of the proudest moments of his life. Having to leave because of the illegality of the war in Iraq was hard but he felt he had no alternative.

Hart Viges, a US veteran, similarly came to the view that he could not, in all conscience, continue to participate in this, or any other war. Having joined up after 9/11 to do something to defend his country, he was faced with the reality of what the US forces were expected to do to civilians in Iraq and had applied for and obtained conscientious objector status. It was palpable to those present that the fact that he still has to live with what he did in Iraq weighs heavily on his conscience and will continue to do so.

It may not be obvious, given the public stance of the German Government to the Iraq war, but the German Armed Forces contributed and continue to contribute indirectly to the war in Iraq. Tobias Pflüger, MEP, Co-President of the Intergroup for Peace Initiatives, outlined in detail the contribution they have made and this is available on his website in German (http://tobiaspflueger.twoday.net/stories/1704880/) and in English (http://tobiaspflueger.twoday.net/stories/1704897/). QCEA will shortly be posting a full report of the event on its own website and will then also have these texts available there.

Florian Pfaff, a major in the German Armed Forces, holding a white rose to signify the link between his stance and that of the anti-Nazi campaigners in the group known as 'The White Rose', told of his decision to refuse to undertake work which would support the Iraq war, his subsequent psychiatric assessment, (apparently the German Armed Forces could not believe that someone who questions orders on the grounds of their legality could be sane), his court martial and his court case. In the final instance, at the highest court in Germany with jurisdiction in these matters, he won his case and had his rank reinstated. However, both this experience and the fact that the Federal Defence Ministry has subsequently issued a paper indicating that they will ignore this judgment in practice, have reinforced his conviction that he must continue to speak out.

The hearing also brought to light the difficulty of soldiers in this situation obtaining CO status with an honourable discharge and how the military authorities make this difficult leaving some soldiers no other choice than to go AWOL. This raises the question about rights to asylum for soldiers in this situation and one of the key messages from the hearing was a call to the EU Member States to grant asylum in these circumstances. Rudi Friedrich, of Connection e.V. (a German organisation which helps soldiers in this situation) gave evidence of the significant difficulties faced by them.

Ikram Al-Moien, a German citizen of Iraqi origin who was seriously injured on a visit to family in Iraq during this war, had hoped to attend the hearing and contribute to the evidence. However, illness related to his war injuries prevented him from attending at the last minute.

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We had also hoped that Cindy Sheehan, whose son Casey is one of the many US soldiers to be killed in Iraq, and who has become a prominent anti-war campaigner, would be present to give evidence as to the illegality and immorality of this war. She had, however, been arrested a week earlier in New York and injured in the course of the arrest to such an extent that she was unable to travel. She sent a moving video message to the hearing. 'When the Bush administration uses white phosphorous on innocent men, women, and children and babies, when it uses illegal imprisonment and immoral torture on fellow members of the human race, when it invades and occupies another country that is no threat to the USA, we must say 'No'. Not only do we not have to love our government's policies; when they are evil, we have a patriotic obligation to oppose them with all our strength.'

Martina Weitsch

For further information about the event see the website of War Resisters' International: http://wri-irg.org

Brussels honours Bertha von Suttner on International Women's Day 2006

The plaque unveiled at the ceremony on 8 March 2006 Photo: Gerd Greune, European Bureau for Conscientious Objection

In the early evening of 8 March 2006, some 150 or so guests gathered at the European Economic and Social Committee Building – the occasion was the re-naming of one of the buildings used by the Committee in honour of Bertha von Suttner.

This was an opportune moment to honour an Austrian woman peace campaigner who, 100 years ago, was the first woman (and the 6th individual) to win the Nobel Peace Prize. In fact, in two of the preceding years, the prize was shared by two people, so she was only the second person to be awarded the prize outright.

It was opportune, as the event took place during the Austrian presidency, and during a period when the European Economic and Social Committee is headed by a President who is also an Austrian, Anne-Marie Sigmund, and the European Commissioner for External Relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, herself an Austrian, were there to lead the celebrations.

Bertha von Suttner was a radical campaigner who flouted all convention; a woman from an aristocratic background and married to an aristocrat, she entered public life both as a writer and as a campaigner for peace and women's rights at a time when this was unheard of and broadly unacceptable to her peers. But without her, who knows where the peace movement would be today – it would have had a slower and less emphatic beginning.

Later this spring, on 3 May 2006, an exhibition of art work created as part of the 'Imagine Peace Project' (led by the Austrian Quaker, Dr. Jalka) as part of the centenary celebrations of the award to Bertha von Suttner of the Nobel Peace Prize, will be opened in the European Parliament.

Martina Weitsch

Living the Gaza Nightmare

As the call for dawn prayers from the mosques floated serenely across Gaza City at 4am one morning in December, a deathly sound erupted and ripped through the airwaves, terrorizing and momentarily silencing the 1.4 million strong population of the Gaza Strip.

Israel's policy of collective punishment in the Gaza Strip has resumed over recent months in the form of sonic booms, immense sound explosions caused by Israeli planes flying through Gaza's airspace. The aim is to provoke fear and ensure, despite Israel's claim that it no longer bears responsibility for the people of Gaza, that the Palestinians inside the Strip do not forget that their days and nights are still entirely controlled by Israel.

The effects of these sonic booms are difficult to describe; they are caused by Israeli fighter jets that fly silently and slowly, and abruptly speed up, breaking the sound barrier and creating an enormous explosive sound. The explosions happen unexpectedly in the dead of the night and are so thunderous that windows shatter, doors and walls crack, and one feels like the house is being blown up. The experience is a terrifying one and it is almost impossible to go back to sleep because the timing of these booms is meticulously planned so that people are starting to calm down slightly, when the Israeli jets swoop down again and produce another one.

These booms have been shown to have serious effects on the population, in particular women and children, and effects of trauma last long after the night of the sonic booms. In addition, people with heart problems have suffered heart attacks and shocking numbers of pregnant women in Gaza have lost their babies during periods of frequent sonic booms. Israel itself, although it cannot truly understand the terrifying experience of the sonic booms without having lived through it, is well aware of its unpleasant effects and began with this policy of collective punishment only after pulling its Jewish settlers out of the Gaza Strip - it would never dream of inflicting this kind of fear upon its own citizens.

Israel is still occupying the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the world needs to pay attention to what is happening inside this imprisoned and controlled piece of land. Collective punishment is illegal under international law; a UN member state like Israel must assume its responsibilities and cannot continue carrying out these kinds of actions. Above all, there must be a political solution encouraged to put an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and bring peace to the civilians of both nations.

I as a foreigner am shocked and depressed by the way these things are happening and the way Israel gets away with this kind of treatment against the Palestinians, however I am in admiration of the people of Gaza – they grow stronger every time and remain optimistic that one day they will live in peace. They just cannot believe that they continue to be treated in a sub-human manner and deprived of any attempt at living in dignity and bringing up their children in a calm and educational environment.

Kate Burton

Kate Burton works for Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights, an NGO that works at protecting the human rights, in particular the economic, social and cultural rights, of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Kidnapped in Gaza for 58 hours during December 2005, Kate has decided to stay in the Palestinian territories and work at improving the situation.

Book Review

Civilian Peacekeeping – a new report from the Life and Peace Institute (Sweden), a member of the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office.

The author, Lisa Schirch, sets out to answer the following questions: why intervention, what type of intervention, who intervenes when and how? She provides a good overview of some existing approaches to civilian peacekeeping and highlights the key questions which intervention raises.

There is a valuable analysis of what peacekeeping and peacebuilding mean and what the differences are between civilian and military peacekeeping. She spells out the underlying message of armed peacekeeping 'Stop fighting or we'll kill you' and of unarmed /civilian/non-violent peacekeeping 'You'll have to kill us before you kill other civilians'. Both messages are powerful, but in very different ways.

She looks at examples of civilian intervention: responses within the war zones (and in this context the role of women can be particularly important), a range of NGOs (10 of these are examined in detail throughout the book), civilian state actors and government funded civil peace

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services. This is useful.

Under the heading 'When to use Civilian Peacekeeping', chapter 6 looks at the question of why intervention should happen though this theme is not fully explored. Is intervention the simple response to the cry 'Something must be done' in the face of great suffering, or is it an expression of the political and economic interests of the intervenors? The book only hints at this and in that sense, it only addresses some of the questions it poses in the introduction.

It looks in greater depth and helpfully at the motivations, skills and training needs of civilians who want to be part of civilian interventions.

The book is written from a global rather than a European perspective and the whole question of the role of the EU and its Member States (rather than that of the UN) does not get much of a look in. It is a pity that the one reference to the developing capabilities of the EU in this context is factually open to misinterpretation. But all that this implies is the need for a more in-depth look at this aspect of EU policy.

The book is available from Life and Peace Institute, PO Box 1520, SE-751 45 Uppsala, Sweden and can also be downloaded as a pdf from www.life-peace.org

Martina Weitsch

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