

DIOCESAN NEWS

Israeli authorities jail Catholic peace activist

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — On a recent trip to the West Bank, J. Thomas Malthaner was allegedly punched in the head by an Israeli settler, was arrested for uprooting trees on disputed land, and spent several days in police and military custody.

All in all, Malthaner said, it was a good experience.

Malthaner, a member of Rochester's Corpus Christi Parish, could come back from his trip abroad with such a view because he is committed to nonviolent intervention in the conflict between Israeli settlers and West Bank Palestinians.

Malthaner traveled to Israel May 11, and returned to Rochester on June 9. He went as a volunteer with Christian Peacemaker Teams, a Chicago-based project of the Mennonite, Brethren and Quaker churches.

"Our purpose is to try to bring some nonviolent presence to violent situations," Malthaner said of CPT. "A lot of the time just our physical presence helps."

Malthaner worked with a four-member team that had been present since June 1995 in Hebron, a mostly Palestinian city that lies southeast of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Hebron also contains an Israeli settlement and 1,200 Israeli soldiers, according to CPT information.

Israel agreed to withdraw from Hebron in March of this year according to the peace accord with Palestinian leaders, but the withdrawal has been delayed. The fate of the city has come under question with the election of new Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has promised to protect Israeli settlements like the one in Hebron.

Galdi Baltiansky, spokesman for the Israeli embassy in Washington, D.C., told the *Catholic Courier* in a phone interview that the decision to delay Israeli withdrawal from Hebron until after Israel's recent elections was made with the consent of Palestinian authorities. He added that Israel's new government has said it will honor the peace accord's terms.

Hebron's Palestinian mayor had invited CPT to the city last year to bring international attention to its situation, according to an article written by Kathleen Kern, a CPT member from Rochester. The article was in the January-March issue of *The Link*, a newsletter published by Ameri-

cans for Middle East Understanding, Inc., out of New York City.

When Malthaner was asked by the *Courier* if CPT could be seen as taking the Palestinians' side in Hebron, he responded that the organization opposes injustice by anyone. Nonetheless, he stressed that he believed the Palestinians get the short end of the social justice stick on the West Bank.

"It's very clear that the Palestinians have been abused in this occupation," Malthaner said, claiming he had witnessed Israeli army harassment and beatings of Palestinians.

Baltiansky said that the situation on the West Bank must be understood in the context of Israel protecting its security against terrorism, and he stressed that Israel initiated the peace process.

"We don't want to rule anybody," he said.

The Israeli army arrested Malthaner on the afternoon of May 28. He and three other members of his team were removing olive tree saplings planted by Israeli settlers on a Palestinian family's land. The land was located in Suyisa, south of Hebron. An Israeli court had even ruled that the land belonged to the Palestinian family, but the army ignored the court documents Malthaner and others showed them, he claimed.

Malthaner and other members of the team — two men and one woman, all from the United States — and two Palestinians along with another U.S. woman were taken into custody by the army. Malthaner said he was punched in the back of the head by an Israeli settler as he was getting into an army vehicle.

The CPT members were charged with destruction of the trees, Malthaner said, and held by the army until about midnight, when they were taken to Hebron's police station. There, they were compelled to sit on a flight of stairs for 15 hours and were deprived of sleep, Malthaner said.

"That was the only inhumane treatment we had," he said, emphasizing that the Israelis subsequently treated the team members fairly well.

Malthaner even spent time in a Jerusalem jail cell with a group of Jewish prisoners, mostly petty criminals. Ironically, one English-speaking prisoner was a settler who wound up almost befriend- ing Malthaner.



Bill Hawken

Kindergarten students at Rochester's Holy Family School celebrated their graduation on Flag Day, June 14, with a flag theme. Above, left to right, Meghan Weir, Krista Berndt and Kevin Quatro wait to process into the school's auditorium for the graduation ceremony. Right, "Grandpa" Norb Robach, who volunteers at the school, helps RaeAnn Mattice untangle her red, white and blue ribbons. A total of 45 kindergarteners graduated.



Malthaner said the imprisoned settler told him, "I don't agree with you, but I've got to admire the courage you have."

Malthaner noted that all four CPT members were released from custody after four days because all agreed to sign a statement that they would not return to Hebron. Malthaner said he and the others signed the statement primarily because they were concerned for the fate of Wendy Lehman, the female member of the team, who had reason to fear that a drug-addicted prisoner might harm her.

Malthaner man said that despite the statement, he and his fellow team volunteers are backed by the CPT organization in their desire to return to Hebron. The four decided that it was wrong of the Israelis to bar them since Israel was supposed to cede the city to Palestinian control under the peace agreement, he explained.

In fact, Malthaner sent the *Courier* a

June 11 letter from Hebron's mayor, Mustafa Natsche, noting that the CPT is welcome in Hebron.

"We hope that all people of conscience and goodwill will support the right of foreign guests to observe the conditions of the people here ...," Natsche wrote.

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NY awards Providence project \$1.65 million

The New York State Housing Trust Fund has awarded \$1.65 million to Providence Housing Development Corporation, an affiliate of Catholic Charities.

That, plus \$450,000 committed by the Monroe County Department of Planning and Development, will go toward developing "Union Meadows" — 48 elderly and family rental housing units at Union Square off South Union Street in Chili.

"We expect it to be affordable for people working but who aren't making much, for families earning in the low \$20s," said Maggie Bringewatt, Providence's executive director, who received a letter from the state June 10.

News of the grant follows the May announcement of grants for which Providence helped apply, from the Homeless Housing and Assistance Program of the New York State Department of Social Services. Those grants were:

- \$175,000 to Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier, for six apartments for residents the state defines as "seriously and persistently mentally ill," served by Catholic Charities' Gateways Community Living Program.

The apartments are planned for a Catholic Charities building to be renovated at 605 College Ave., Elmira.

- \$123,000 to buy a house on Macbeth Street to expand Rogers House, 287 Breck St., Rochester, a Corpus Christi Church program for ex-offenders. A total of six residents will be served, according to Jim Smith, director.

- \$360,000 to Mercy System of the Southern Tier, which operates St. James Mercy Hospital, to renovate a donated building in Almond, between Hornell and Alfred, to provide affordable, stable, permanent housing for young women and their children. Nine or 10 spacious apartments are planned.

The Chili project may be the first of these projects to get underway, perhaps by fall, Bringewatt said. Support from the county and town helped the project score well with the state, she said.

"It was a very competitive process," she said of the Housing Trust grants. "There was only \$25 million available statewide." Another local organization, Neighborhood Housing Services of Rochester, received \$200,000, she added.

While applications for potential residents for the Chili project aren't being taken yet, she said, "We would be glad to take people's names if they're interested."

The Union Meadows project encompasses 12 buildings (including one for community activities). Each unit has its own entrance, garage, and laundry hook-up. Units with one to three bedrooms will be available.

"They really are attractive units," Bringewatt said. "I think they will fit in nicely with the community."

—Kathleen Schwarz

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