



Middle East

Peace activists step in to pave the way to the olive branches

THE SCENE HAS become a typical one: Palestinian villagers attempt to return to the West Bank land they've harvested for generations. They arrive both on foot and on donkeys, with burlap sacks, rakes, and ladders—ready to pick olives from the groves. Yet before they can reach the trees, they're met by a militant band of Israeli settlers—in vans and on foot—firing guns and throwing stones in an effort to drive the villagers away. Why? The Israelis say they are protecting their nearby settlements from hostile attack, while the Palestinians say they are only trying to harvest their crops and take control of their livelihood.

The conflict has been ongoing since the late 1970s, when Israelis began settling in the West Bank. The situation over the last few months, howev-

er, has grown increasingly violent.

In response, groups of Israeli and international peace activists including the International Women's Peace Service (IWPS), the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), and the Israeli organization Rabbis for Human Rights have joined together to help Palestinian villagers protect their crops. And they seem to be making progress.

In mid-October, several hundred Palestinian villagers from Yasuf (many of whom had not been to their olive groves in two years) and about 20 activists were able to secure protection from Israeli soldiers and ultimately

LENDING A HAND An activist from Ireland helps Palestinians harvest their groves this past October in Yanun, West Bank.

fend off attacks by Israeli militants from the Tapuah settlement. Their strategy? A quiet sit-in. Stymied by the unexpected act of solidarity, the settlers left the area for the day and the farmers were able to harvest.

In Yanun, too, activists helped Palestinian families reclaim their land by going to live in the region and harvest olives alongside them. Progress indeed. But the struggle is far from over and it remains to be seen what will happen next time. —RACHEL RABKIN

Last-minute save for women at World Summit

At the 11th hour, the final document of last summer's 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, was reopened to restore language that requires health services to conform to "human rights and fundamental freedoms" as well as "cultural and religious values." Protests were triggered inside and outside the summit because the document

originally had retreated from that standard language, used in other UN declarations to carefully balance the interests of religious conservatives with the rights of women to contraception, safe abortion, and other reproductive services. "We won, we won," June Zeitlin, executive director of the nonprofit Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), said at the time. "Never underestimate the women of the world."



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