

Human rights: LAW marks 10th year

by Ludwig Watzal

THE 10th anniversary of the Palestinian human rights organization LAW is supposed to be a joyful event. Although the organization has achieved a lot in its fight to protect the human rights of its people in the last ten years, the future of Palestine does not look bright.

A realistic skepticism dominated the conference "Culture and Community in Jerusalem: Strategies to Protect and Promote Human Rights" which was held from June 5th to the 7th at the Ambassador Hotel in Jerusalem. The over 600 participants from all over the world had to cope with a very ambitious agenda. There were two to three plenary sessions per day plus workshops on women, youth, Bedouins and advocacy.

Faisal Husseini, the Holder of the Jerusalem File, opened the conference telling the audience that, "at this very moment, a house in Beit Jala is being demolished. Is this peace," he asked.

Although the conference focused strongly on Jerusalem, it was overlapped by the pressing question of establishing a state of Palestine or not. This focus was expressed by Hanan Ashrawi who mentioned the ongoing oppression, the injustices and the discrimination despite the peace process and Mustafa Barghouti who raised the question whether the Palestinian people will accept this type of a

state: "We don't want another South Africa and a new racist regime in this area," he said. For Ashrawi, Jerusalem is the essence and the only place in which one can show whether peace is possible.

The religious dimension of Jerusalem was dealt with by a special panel. Jeremy Milgrim, Rabbi and co-director of Clergy for Peace, gave a personal insight into the Jewish understanding of Jerusalem. He described what a Jew associates with the city. "Zion must be redeemed in justice. The holiness of the place cannot be guaranteed with weapons." He condemned the combination of religion and nationalism which is embodied in political movements like the National Religious Party in Israel. "We have to move away from nationalism and have to relate to Islam and Christianity as partners," he said. The demonstration on the so called "Jerusalem Day" showed that "the young kids were brain-washed."

Bernard Sabella, Associate Professor of Sociology at Bethlehem University, stated that Jerusalem is not an "exclusive enterprise" of the Jews and that Israel's position on the city is based on "wishful thinking".

Mustafa Abu-Sway, expert on Islamic studies and modern Islamic thought, asked how one can convince people to practice reconciliation when their land and property is stolen. He mentioned several cases

in which Israel turned mosques into bars, restaurants, plastic factories or galleries. He repudiated Jimmy Carter's statement that there is religious freedom in the Holy Land.

All the speakers made it clear that Jerusalem cannot be the capital of one faith. Israelis and Palestinians must share it. To reach any progress, Israel has to overcome its "peace syndrome", according to Manuel Hassasien, Vice President of Bethlehem University.

The question of a Palestinian state and the status of Jerusalem within that state bothered many speakers. Azmi Bishara, Knesset-member and an Israeli-Palestinian, is against a separate state, although he agrees it will be proclaimed. "In the logic of the peace process, I am

against a state," he said. "The dimension of liberation was substituted by a movement for the establishment of a state. Rather than establishing a state, the Palestinians should convince the world that their issue is a "just issue". What we see right now will be an "unjust peace". Israel and the US will put a lot of pressure on the Palestinians to accept imposed conditions. The Role of Europe in this power struggle is the position of a "Research assistant" to Israel and the United States," Bishara said. He continued: "The state will only be another way of crisis. After the declaration, the Palestinians have to negotiate with Israel over the same problems and issues they are quarreling right now.

For Ghassan Al Khatib, Director of the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center (JMCC), it is not so important whether a state is established or not. "Much more important for the people are the future of Jerusalem, settlements and refugees, said Al-Khatib.

The challenge faced by the Palestinian leadership was demonstrated by the Dutch cartographer and planner Jan de Jong. De Jong used the example of Anata village in order to demonstrate what will happen in the future if the Palestinians do not reverse the political agenda and start working together with the people from below. The scenario he developed is more than gloomy. To make it brighter all Palestinians must cooperate.