

"Powerless" Bedouin Village Still Seeking Health Care

by Am Johal

Israel's Negev desert is facing a public health crisis. After much public pressure, in June 2004, the Ministry of Health revealed the findings of its epidemiological study - there are 65% higher rates of cancer and mortality for those living within a 20km radius of the Ramat Hovav Industrial Zone. Some 350,000 people live within this danger zone, including the residents of Beer Sheva. The Bedouin village of Wadi el Na'am is located 500m from Ramat Hovav – which encompasses 19 hazardous agro and petro-chemical factories, and a toxic waste incinerator. The site has ironically won state awards for environmental stewardship for four years in a row. In all the paradoxes of Israel, this one defies expectations. A few years ago, even the IDF vacated the Manos military camp, 2 km to the north of the factories after soldiers became ill, and complained about a fierce stench from the site.

In addition to the Ramat Hovav industrial zone, the unrecognized Bedouin village of Wadi el Na'am is surrounded by an IDF munitions factory and military fire zone, the Efrat Oil Terminal - an oil-storage site, the Israel Electric Company and Makorot – the national water carrier site. Although the public amenities companies are located inside the village, the government does not recognize this village, or the other 70,000 Bedouin living in Unrecognized Villages in the Negev. These Israeli citizens live underneath high voltage pylons, but have no electricity. The villagers live next to the water carrier, but have no water in their homes.

Health problems which are persistent in Wadi el Na'am include high rates of cancer, asthma in children under 6, eye infections and miscarriages. Livestock have also been killed off by infection. Wadi el Na'am is one of 38 Bedouin villages which do not have access to medical care in their villages. Lack of public transportation, socio-economic conditions and other forms of state discrimination further marginalizes the Bedouin community. The Bedouin villages also lack access roads, sewage, welfare, and educational facilities, whereby further exacerbating health problems.

There are three principal risk factors related to the nearby Ramat Hovav chemical site. First, evaporation pools have been created to store toxic waste and extend over an area of 3,250 acres. The local industrial council (an independent municipality without any residents, which in essence gives license to the polluters to monitor their own pollution levels) has spent \$10 million to construct a biological plant for treatment of waste in 2000, but it has yet to become operational due to technological problems. Secondly, the emission from the factories, particularly Bromine Compounds Ltd. and Makhteshim Group emit hazardous and highly toxic chemicals and carcinogens. Thirdly, two plants, Government Company for Environmental Services and Akosol Ltd – store toxic waste on-site. All of this has grave health implications for the two adjacent Bedouin villages of Wadi Al-Nam which has 4,500 residents and Wadi Almshash with 850 residents.

On the rolling plains of the Negev desert, there are modern incarnations of former Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's vision of "making the desert bloom" – new Jewish settlements are being established under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Negev Development Plan which will include the transfer of 38 Bedouin villages despite the opposition of Arab and Jewish groups into government planned townships. These neighborhoods replete with full infrastructure were all approved by the Knesset with consent from the Bedouin Authority, a quasi-governing body falling under the Israeli Land Administration. In other words, the Bedouin are being displaced and pauperized, as the Negev is being cleared for expansion by Jewish settlers from Gaza among other areas in the country.

Millions are being invested toward this unsustainable plan to develop the Negev.

In April of 2003, Bustan L'Shalom, which means 'grove' in both Hebrew and Arabic, a grassroots human rights and environmental sustainability organization and its Director Devorah Brous, led the pioneering effort to build the Medwed Project, the construction of a straw-bale, solar-powered medical clinic in Wadi el Na'am.

Without formal construction approval from the ILA, the Bedouin Authority or from regional health authorities who had failed to act in providing basic health care services - despite their High Court mandate to do so, Bustan built a solid partnership with the villagers and proceeded to build the clinic with the hope that health services could be provided by an HMO or by volunteer health professionals. Since the village is unrecognized, it was built without a permit and like all infrastructure in these villages, it is subject to demolition at any time.

The medical clinic was built over 6 days in a work camp with the aid of over 500 volunteers who also took part in lectures about land rights, human rights, development, and Bedouin culture. The clinic is stocked with solar panels donated from 6 companies in the U.S. to help power the clinic - there is no other option for electricity.

The Ministry of Health, and the General Health Fund (the HMO with the most members from the village) is "unwilling to expose their doctors to the health hazards from the plant" among a host of other reasons does not provide health services in the village.

Others disagree with that assessment and claim that the Authorities are using the denial of health and other basic services to push the villagers to move to Townships like Segev Shalom, the neighboring Planned Township. And so, the Medwed Medical Clinic, hand-built by volunteers only last year, sits empty apart from occasional community lectures about human rights and eco-building. It remains a pariah among state authorities for its technically illegal act of constructive dissent - the building of a medical clinic in the face of a health and environmental catastrophe for an indigenous community clearly facing state discrimination.

The problem of the unrecognized villages has become increasingly aggravated since 1965 when the government approved the Planning and Construction Law as well as an outline

plan in which hundreds of Bedouin villages and localities were deliberately ignored and considered not to exist. The lands were classified as agricultural land, rendering all buildings erected as illegal.

The government (Israeli) has also passed the "Removal of Intruders Law" which effectively streamlines the effort of state agencies to expel Bedouin from their lands and accelerate the existing practise of home demolitions and land confiscations in the Negev. In the view of many Bedouin leaders, the government's own Bedouin Authority is a chief culprit in discriminatory decision-making since its inception in 1987.

Almost 38 % of the governmental funds for the Arab Bedouin communities in the Negev will be allocated to implement land confiscation policies of the government especially in the unrecognized villages in 2004.

Orly Almy, the Project Coordinator for Physicians for Human Rights, says that, "The state has obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to implement the right to medical care as an essential function of the right to health."

The Bedouin have increasingly attempted to influence the Israeli government, the Bedouin Authority and the legal system through a variety of methods. They have also increasingly sought the aid of international authorities to help recognize their unique status within Israel.

Legal proceedings and government lobbying carried out on behalf of the Bedouin community and the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages through the use of organizations like the Association of Civil Rights in Israel, the Mossawa Center and Adalah have been minimally successful in gaining access to health care and other services. Governmental institutions seem to be very much in the process of carrying out the Negev Development Plan at the direct expense of the Bedouin minority in the unrecognized villages.

The broader question of how the Gaza withdrawal will effect the Bedouin settlements in the Negev has yet to be fully examined.

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