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Nobel laureate Mairead Maguire practices nonviolence in Palestine

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Voices in the Wilderness founder Kathy Kelly called April 21 with alarming news. Our dear friend, Mairead Corrigan Maguire, the 1976 Irish Nobel Peace Prize winner, hailed as one of the world's great voices for nonviolence, was shot the day before by Israeli soldiers. She was in the middle of a Palestinian nonviolent vigil for human rights at the Israeli-built separation wall in the Palestinian village of Bil'in. (See *NCR* story: Nobel laureate injured in West Bank.)

News was sketchy at first, but we soon learned she was hit in the leg by a rubber bullet. And later, returning to the scene, she succumbed as Israeli soldiers unleashed tear gas to disperse the weekly protest.

She returned to Ireland a few days later to recuperate, and we had a good long talk. A raw, angry bruise blackens much of her leg. And the aura of the brutality lies fresh in her mind. Yet her passion still burns for the Palestinians' nonviolent struggle for liberation.

"Before the peace vigil," she said, "I participated in a press conference with the Palestinian Minister for Information. He praised the nonviolent vigil of the Bil'in people and the nonviolent resistance of many people around Palestine. He said that the Bil'in resistance movement was a model and example for all. He called for an end to the building of the wall, and for upholding of Palestinian rights under International Law.

"I supported his call and thanked the people of Bil'in. I offered my support for the nonviolent resistance to the wall as it violates international law, including the International Court of Justice in the Hague. I also called for an end to the Palestinian occupation, which will mark 40 years in June, and full recognition by the international community of the Palestinian government, together with restoration of economic and political rights to the people.

"Then during our peace walk to the wall," she continued, "Israeli soldiers started firing a mystery gas at us, and aimed plastic bullets directly at us. Later, they used water cannons. We were a completely unarmed. It was a completely peaceful, nonviolent gathering. This vicious attack upon civilians by the Israeli soldiers was totally unprovoked. The soldiers blocked the upper part of the road, preventing some from joining the main vigil.

"As I helped a French woman, I was shot in the leg with a three inch long, rubber-covered steel bullet. I was targeted by an Israeli soldier and shot from a distance of 20 meters. This itself was illegal because such lethal weapons, under Israeli military law, are not allowed to be used within a 20-meter range. Altogether 20 people were injured. But as you know, six Palestinians were killed the next day, including a 17-year-old girl, a typical day under the occupation.

Later she went back to the protest where people were still being viciously attacked with gas and plastic bullets. She said, "This time, I was overcome with gas. My nose bled terribly and I was carried again to an ambulance for treatment."

Mairead is no stranger to active nonviolence. The Nobel Prize went to her 30 years ago after her nieces and nephew were killed on a Belfast street. A British soldier shot a fleeing IRA gunman. And the gunman's car careened into the sidewalk, killing the children and injuring Mairead's sister, who died a few years later.

Within days, Mairead, along with friends Betty Williams and Ciaran McKeown, mobilized hundreds of thousands, mostly women, to march for peace. The marches continued every Saturday for the next six months, and grew to become the largest gesture for peace in the history of Northern Ireland. The Peace People movement, which advocates nonviolent conflict resolution, continues to this day.

Maguire has traveled the globe since, speaking to millions about the practice of active nonviolence, and working tirelessly with other international figures such as the Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Pope John Paul II. I edited a collection of her writings and speeches a few years ago and wrote the forward to the book *The Vision of Peace: Faith and Hope in Northern Ireland and the World* (Orbis Books).

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"This is not only an abuse of human rights and international law by the Israeli government," Mairead says of the Palestinian occupation. "It is a health and environmental issue. We were all traumatized by the

Israeli attack. With the gas on the air, I remembered the words of a Palestinian doctor, who said, "The whole Palestinian people, after 40 years of occupation, are traumatized. It is time for the international community to act and put a stop to this suffering and injustice."

I reached Archbishop Tutu, who is visiting Taiwan, and he issued a strong statement, condemning the attack on Mairead, "as I condemn all violence, whoever the perpetrator."

Mairead is one of the wisest, holiest, most respected peacemakers in the world. She could easily sit back and put her feet up, and enjoy her wonderful family and her wee cottage along the Irish coast, especially now that Northern Ireland recently turned another corner toward peace.

Instead she travels every few months to Palestine to stand with the resisters, and to draw attention to Israel's 200 to 400 nuclear weapons by supporting Israeli whistle-blower Mordechai Vanunu. She takes great risks for peace, and practices the nonviolence she teaches. She does so, because she knows the people of Bil'in and elsewhere take great risks when they hold their weekly vigil under the Israeli army's bellicose eye.

When a Nobel Peace Prize winner suffers violence, and the world scarcely takes notice, such times are outrageous and dark. But she's not deterred. And we can draw from her determination the inspiration to take risks ourselves for oppressed people everywhere. It is time, she said, for action to force the Israeli Government to enter into unconditional talks to end this tragedy upon the good and gentle Palestinian people. "Tell everyone," she told me over the phone, "we have to end the occupation now!" Hers is a call to pursue the Jewish vision of shalom -- human rights for all.

Jesuit priest and peace activist John Dear's new book, *Transfiguration*, (Doubleday, with a foreword by Archbishop Tutu) is available from

www.amazon.com or your local bookstore. John is to stand trial May 18 for a protest against the Iraq war and faces a month in prison. For more information, see: www.johndear.org

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