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BETHLEHEM – NATIVITY UNDER FIRE

By Gloria Sala

Middle East - It was the ideal place to give birth to a baby. That is until the latest raid by the Israeli army. Which violated the Holy Family Hospital. Frightening new-born babies sleeping in their cots.

The yellow flag of the Vatican flies on the roof, but the large white stone building, with its gardens full of orange trees, has an Arabian flavour to its architecture. The Holy Family Hospital is an oasis of peace in the heart of Bethlehem, a place dedicated to maternity in a **city which has become a symbol of birth**. Not only for Christians, but also for Jews, who worship nearby at the tomb of Rachael, the patron saint of children. And yet, in the never-ending chain of actions and reactions typical of the conflict in this holy and bloodstained land, the neutrality of the hospital has been violated. This happened less than a month ago, during the latest raid by the Israeli army in Palestinian territory, in answer to the killing of the minister for Tourism Rehavam Zeevi. «There was a tank outside the gates, which was shooting at the surrounding buildings» says Dr. Robert Tabash, director of the Holy Family, bitterly. «The machine guns hit the windows in the entrance, the central corridor and the laundry room where staff were working, and the bullets ricocheted and reached the intensive therapy room for new-born babies, where there were premature babies sleeping in their incubators. We found the cribs close to the windows covered with shards of glass. «Now the **Order of Malta, which owns the structure, has filed an action under the Geneva Convention** for human rights and the French foreign secretary has protested against the bombing of the hospital. «There were clashes in the area, the Palestinian troops were hiding in the streets, between the hospital and the university» explains Tabash. «But no one entered our premises: there was no reason whatsoever to open fire on the hospital, spreading panic amongst those giving birth». No war spares innocent people, but the events which took place in Bethlehem in October, before the prime minister Sharon ordered the army to withdraw, have caused harm even in the most unexpected places.

In addition to the Holy Family, the hospital managed by an Italian NGO in Bet Jalla (a suburb of Bethlehem) was hit by bullets. Even coming in and out of the hospital became dangerous. Dr. Tabash remembers the

moments of fear at the Holy Family: «They bombed us at night, **there was smoke everywhere, the nurses evacuated the new-born babies, some patients collapsed from shock.** It's a miracle that there weren't any victims». Getting help was difficult too. The night on which a fire broke out in a nearby building hit by bombs, risking an explosion in the oxygen warehouse of the hospital, the fire brigade, blocked by tanks in the street, took more than an hour to intervene: «We had to call the French consul general and international authorities in order to have the street opened to let the fire brigade through" says the doctor.

The Holy Family Hospital has been working in the Bethlehem area for over a century. Founded in 1884 by the Daughters of Charity, it was made into a specialised clinic for obstetrics and neonatal medicine only ten years ago. When it became property of the Order of Malta in '95, the French representative laid out **a project for restructuring the buildings, updating the structures and health services and training the staff to the highest possible level.** The EU has also helped finance some of the equipment. The administrative board is made up of members of the Order of Malta of different nationalities and has its headquarters in Rome, presided over by Albrecht von Boeselager. «The first baby was born in 1990» explains Tabash, who studied in France and has been working in the clinic for 31 years. «Since then another 25 thousand have been born. With the increase in requests, we opened a gynaecology and paediatrics clinic and a mobile prenatal medicine unit to reach the more distant villages and Hebron itself, during the period when the Palestinian territories were closed. Many women depend on welfare aid, especially after the Intifada and, when patients can't pay, we cure them free of charge. Because of this we are now in debt. Taking into account the quality of our service, our charges are very low, as they have to match the standards of the Palestinian economy. Admission to give birth costs 120 dollars, a caesarean section only 400 dollars. On the other hand the neonatal department needs a highly qualified team, who specialise in Europe at high costs for us» says Dr. Tabash. Until last year, when there were 3,500 births, the number of births was growing constantly. However, in 2001, because of the check-points, they fell by half. Yet in the past, even in times of the most violent clashes, many women in Jerusalem, journalists' and diplomats' wives, braved the check-points in order to give birth at the Holy Family. The relaxing atmosphere in the rooms which host two to three patients, the clean smell and the view of the gardens create an almost magic environment dreamt of by all mothers-to-be. Two of them, however, in the last few weeks, were unable to realise this dream. One of them went into labour in front of a military post which stopped her entering Bethlehem, and died. Another, Fatma Abed Rabbo, 25, gave birth to a premature baby at a check-point. The baby did not survive. Fatma lives with her husband Naser, an unemployed labourer, her five year old daughter Arija, and her grandmother in a modest house on the outskirts of Bethlehem. «When Fatma went into labour» says Naser agitatedly, sat next to his wife's bed «we had to ask a poultry merchant to take us to the hospital. **I begged the soldiers, I argued, shouted. Fatma was writhing in pain, the baby was born in the car, in the cold.** The driver wrapped the baby up in his jacket, and Fatma's grandmother cut the umbilical cord with her veil». Today, in Bethlehem, the city of the nativity, this is the tragedy of giving birth.

