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Fighting at home for peace in the Middle East

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Fighting at home for peace in the Middle East

By DANIEL STURM

Lansing resident Mike McCurdy said that during a peacekeeping mission last summer he lived in one of the multi-family dwellings in the Gaza Strip that were destroyed earlier this month in Israel's largest offensive in decades.

"We need Congress to condemn Israel's actions and demand a withdrawal from the Westbank and the Gaza Strip, and we need to end all U.S. military funding to Israel," McCurdy said.

McCurdy was one of 30 peace activists who rallied Friday in front of the Capitol and then staged a sit-in in U.S. Sen. Carl Levin's Lansing office to protest the military action in Palestine.

"We are urging Senator Levin to call upon our government to make Israel stop the assault," said the Rev. Peter Dougherty, a Catholic priest from Lansing who has served in the Middle East on eight international peace teams.

James Turner, who manages the office, which is in the Boji Tower at Capitol Avenue and Allegan Street, promised to call Washington and relay the message to Levin.

The rally and sit-in, which was sponsored by several peace groups including Concerned Citizens for Gaza, the Arab-American Discrimination Committee and Congress of Arab Americans, drew residents from Kalamazoo, Perry and Ann Arbor as well as Lansing.

The event was framed as a response to the Israeli offensive in Gaza during which 43 Palestinians were killed, many of whom were schoolchildren. More than 200 were injured and almost 2,000 were left homeless after their homes were demolished. The weeklong offensive ended May 19, when the human rights organization Amnesty International reported the killing of eight more Palestinians, four of them children. Dozens of others were reported injured by the Israeli Army during a demonstration in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah, where McCurdy said he had lived. Concerned about excessive methods and the violation of international law, Amnesty International urged Israel's government to promptly carry out a thorough and independent investigation into the killings.

Army officials claimed that tanks shelled an empty building in order to deter the demonstrators from proceeding

toward the Israeli Army. They also stated that Israeli helicopters fired a missile into a nearby open space.

Demonstrators said that the United States should stop its military aid to Israel and condemn the "unlawful" military actions committed by the Israeli military.

Henry Herskovitz, the founder of Jewish Witnesses for Peace and Friends in Ann Arbor, said that providing weapons to Israel subverted the meaning of the word "aid."

"Israel doesn't need the money, other than to continue their illegal occupation of Palestinians and their land," said Herskovitz.

He commended Levin for criticizing the U.S. prisoner abuses in Iraq but criticized him for making no mention of the "war crimes" committed by Israel's government.

"The attitude Levin has as a fellow Jew has thus far been counter-productive to any peace efforts," Herskovitz said. "It is against the basic tendency of Judaism, which is to welcome a stranger and invite them in."

Herskovitz said he believes Levin supports Israel's military actions because he is the largest recipient of donations from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a pro-Israel lobby group on Capitol Hill, second only to the National Rifle Association in its political influence.

As a result of the success of pro-Israeli lobby in Congress, one third of U.S. foreign aid goes to Israel, according to Professor Steven Zunes, chairman of peace and justice studies at the University of San Francisco.

Herskovitz asked fellow American Jews to look inside their hearts to determine whether it was right to expel Palestinians and create an ethnically unique, majority population. "Personally, I don't want to be that kind of a Jew."

Dougherty, who directs the Michigan Peace Team in Lansing, said he felt encouraged about the anti-war sentiment, referring to an opinion poll showing that more than 50 percent of American Jews oppose the occupation of Palestinian territory.

But Herskovitz said his experience in Ann Arbor tells him otherwise. He said that every Saturday, Jewish Witnesses for Peace and Friends holds a vigil in front of a conservative Synagogue in Ann Arbor, and more than 80 percent of the congregation members showed hostile attitudes. Herskovitz believes this pro-occupation attitude stems from a feeling of fear. "I often use the analogy of myself being afraid of water," Herskovitz said. "When I go to the beach, I talk myself over it by saying I'm a good swimmer. I think that's what mainstream Jews need to do, if they confront their fear."

Kathie Kuhn, an organizer of People for Positive Social Change at Lansing Community College, said Americans should consider protesting the corporations that profit from Israel's occupation. A few weeks ago, Kuhn joined 300 protesters at Caterpillar headquarters in Peoria, Ill., demanding that the U.S. firm stop selling bulldozers to Israel. The bulldozers are used for the demolition of homes in the Gaza Strip. Peace activist Rachel Corrie from Olympia, Wash., was crushed by one of the bulldozers last year as she stood between it and a Palestinian home in Rafah that was slated for demolition. "Most corporations just think about profits, not about ethics," Kuhn said.

Michigan State University law student Christian Kurpiel said he felt strongly about making peace in the crisis region. He plans to join a delegation of the Michigan Peace Team in Rafah. They walk Palestinians through checkpoints. Also, their presence as international citizens in Palestinian homes seems to deter Israeli forces from demolishing those homes.

Kurpiel said he wishes the U.S. government would push for a two-state solution. He believes that a "political" peace process would be more effective if coupled with a "human" peace process.

When asked whether he were afraid of being forced to take sides in an escalated conflict, Kurpiel said no: "I see this as an issue of human rights: To be able to live in a home, to walk out at night, and to feed a family. All too often this is not possible for the residents in the West Bank and in Gaza."

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