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Ten Days Under Fire

by Lesley Dawson

Today we begin our exile in Jerusalem. We have been advised to leave the West Bank because there is anger at the UKs involment in the war against Sadaam. We wanted to stay in our flat and even began to tape up the windows to prevent glass being damaged during the bomb blasts. Our landlord, who lives downstairs, came to ask us to leave as he was afraid that the young radicals would blame him for our presence and he has four daughters. He was sure we would understand...

It is three days since we arrived and in that time we have registered for a gas mask, an ugly thing that is difficult to put on properly. On the phone to my mother, she reminded me that she had to carry hers around with her during the Second World War. I think the monstrosities we received probably date from that time. To cheer myself up I bought a yellow plastic container to keep it in. We had to report to the British Consulate to tell them we are still here. The British don't believe in evacuating their personnel, they leave that choice to us. The Americans were the first to go, not surprisingly, they bussed their people south towards Egypt to avoid the bombings around the airport only to find that Sadaam was targeting the road to Beersheva. I read in an article in the Jerusalem Post that they all had to exit the bus and crouch down in a gully by the side of the road.

Well I feel like a hero having survived my first air raid. It goes like this – the siren goes off at the Russian Compound up the road then the hotel's own warning bell sounds and to make sure that nobody has missed all that a porter runs around and bangs on every door. We all have to hurry to the sealed room, which is in the chapel, where we are counted in and checked for gas masks.

The first time it happened a couple from the British Council were found to be missing and still asleep (induced by a heavy dose of alcohol I suspect) .As the room could not be sealed without them, panic ensued and loud conversations took place in Hebrew and Arabic until they entered shamefaced and dishevelled.

I am getting better at this. I keep a sweater and loose trousers to hand with my gas mask (in its yellow case) so I can dress speedily and run to the sealed room. Most people seem to have made similar arrangements but one South American priest always appears in pristine dress with his clerical collar fastened and not a hair out of place. I think he must sleep standing up in all his clothes.

Last night we all decided to photo each other in our gas masks to lighten the mood as we waited for the all clear. When I sent a copy to my mother, she remembered that her gas mask looked just the same. It makes me more convinced that they have been in storage since then.

Earlier tonight we went for dinner to the American Colony Hotel, one of the few hotels in East Jerusalem that still has some selection in the food offered. We sat in the bar watching CNN cat calling at the Americans pontificating on the progress of the war from Washington and New York. Even the Americans in our group are as cynical as the rest of us.

I took a chance and visited friends at the Anglican School this evening hoping not to get caught outside during a bombing. I thought I had made it but as I rang the doorbell the sirens started. Great, I thought. They won't let me in. They will have all gone to their sealed room. I was just about to run back to the hotel when a masked face appeared at the open door and I was beckoned inside quickly.

We are all beginning to get stir crazy and a bit blasé about the bombing so we have decided to go home tomorrow, come what may.