



Video Conferencing for Promotion of Active Nonviolence; Linking West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza Strip Project

The main goal of this Project was to introduce many Palestinian youth to in- depth discussions on the importance and strength of nonviolence and human rights, both as a way of life and as a way of resistance.

MEND's work of videoconferencing brought Palestinians together who normally never have the chance to meet due to the physical barrier imposed by Israeli occupation, and helped to break down many stereotypes.

The project also sought to bring in more local youth to join in MEND's activities and to help spread ideas of nonviolence to their families, friends and schoolmates. The project started on 1 November 2007 and ended on 30 October 2009. It was sponsored by the Toyota Foundation.

Preparations

Prior to the conferences a kick-off meeting took place in Cairo, Egypt from the 27th of January to the 30th January 2008. The meeting for all the Coordinators was to be held in Cairo as the closest and most convenient place for people to get together from Gaza and the West Bank. Even though MEND had arranged permits for the people from Gaza, the three participants from Gaza (among them Abu Selim) had been denied at the border due to a worsened political situation, after Hamas blasted a hole through the wall separating the Gaza Strip from Egypt to allow Palestinians to cross the border and the Egypt government took action to close the border and Palestinians were trapped in Gaza. The discussions proceeded without the participants from Gaza, because it was impossible to postpone the meeting since the rest of the participants of the West Bank were already in Cairo.

The conference covered basically two subjects: the video conferencing project itself and the structure and strategies of the Active Nonviolence Network.

For the project five laptop computers with separate webcams were purchased and distributed among MEND's coordinators, one for Gaza, one for Tul Karem, one for Ramallah, one for Hebron and one for Izaraiyya. Additionally, the computer in the Jerusalem office was used.

After Taka, a Japanese volunteer who was considered to be the Project Coordinator was denied entry by Israel Authority at Ben Gurion Airport, Yakoub Rujoub was asked to take role of the Project Coordinator.

Implementation of the Project

Several video conferences were held between March and May 2008.

On 19 March 2008, Lucy Nusseibeh, MEND Director and Taka, in the East Jerusalem office, managed to conduct the first video conference with Abu Selim and Amina from the MEND office in the Gaza Strip.

Despite having worked with each other for over two years, this was the first occasion that they had been able to see each other.

Further conferences were held on March 26 and April 17th, then, the videoconferences were halted until a re-start in June 2008, because May was the examination season for the youth.

Most video conferences were held between MENDers (youths aged 14-16) in Ramallah, Tulkarem, Al-Izzariya, Hebron and in the initial stages Nablus and Gaza.

During these conferences, the project coordinators, who are experienced nonviolence trainers, gave short presentations about nonviolence, human rights and human security to the participants. Yacoub Rujoub for instance explained in detail about the methodology of Martin Luther King, and brought examples about active nonviolence from Palestinian history, such as the general strike in 1936. Following the presentations, the youth were invited to ask questions, make comments and raise concerns relating to the presentation topics, and also to get to know each other better. The coordinators also acted as mediators during the discussions, giving extra information when it was needed and making sure that the discussions stayed on the topics of nonviolence, human rights and human security. Most of the video conferences followed this sort of pattern, with participants asking questions of each other, giving their opinions, and coordinators adding to the discussion with useful information and examples.

The main topics discussed were:

- The meaning and relevance of nonviolence
- Ways of nonviolence
- Nonviolence activities and how to organise reciprocal MENDers visits
- Discussion on the mechanism of using nonviolent methods and their application in Palestines' internal problems, particularly after the coup of Gaza
- Experiences in the Palestinian nonviolence movement
- The role of university students in such a culture

About 40 meetings were held in total, mostly between Al-Izzariya, Tul Karem and Hebron, but also sometimes between Ramallah, Nablus, Gaza and Jerusalem.

Difficulties

Making a connection with the cities was one of the greatest challenges of the project. After the first conference with Gaza was held many were optimistic that the Gaza participants would be able to continue partaking with the conferences, despite a rocky start due to the Israeli blockade and the election of Hamas. However, as the situation deteriorated and turned more violent, it became very difficult for MEND coordinators and MENDers in the area to get together to participate in the project. Movement in Gaza became increasingly dangerous, especially in the evenings when the majority of conferences were held. Furthermore, electricity was frequently cut off and, when there was electricity, the internet connection was generally too poor to support a video conference. One video conference was held between Gaza, Al-Izzariya, Hebron and Tulkarem, where they mostly discussed the situation in Gaza and compared it with the West Bank. In each place, there were about 4-5 young people plus the local coordinators. The discussions focussed mostly on the situation in Gaza, how life has changed since the Israelis closed the border, and the emotions running through Palestinian society.

Originally, MEND coordinators in Nablus were also expected to participate in the project. A number of conferences took place between MENDers of Nablus and other offices in the West Bank, but due to Israeli interference in the area, high crime rates and frequent gang activity, MEND's Nablus office stopped its engagement in the project.

There were some logistical difficulties with this project, too, e.g. transportation and finding suitable locations for the conferences to be held. The local coordinators were very engaged in enabling the implementation of the conferences. In most cases, where participants were unable to find their own transportation to the conferences, local coordinators used their own vehicles to take people to and from the conferences. When office space was unavailable, the office coordinators generously opened their own homes in order for the conferences to go forward.

In some cases, parents were reluctant to allow their children to take part in a project with people that they were not familiar with. To remedy this, three conferences were held in Al-Izzariya, Hebron, and Tulkarem for the families of those involved, in order to show them exactly what MEND was doing with the project and explain the goals that they were trying to achieve. These meetings were a huge success, and families were more than happy for their children to take part in the video conferences. It also provided other local youth with the opportunity to participate, as the families went on to discuss the project with other local families and encouraged them to tell their children so that they too could be involved. However, nearly all the participants were boys, as the parents were unwilling to let their daughters participate in a project that was not in a regular office, and also one where people stand so close to each other around the computer.

Successes

The greatest success of the videoconferencing project was expanding MEND's nonviolence network by bringing in youth from various West Bank cities who are now active MENDers. There has been a significant increase of youth working with MEND and engaging in nonviolence, especially in Ramallah, Tulkarem, Al- Izzariya and Hebron. Since the end of the video conferencing project, MENDers (many of whom only met each other for the first time through the project) keep in touch with each other through email and telephone and work together to discuss ideas for activities and projects that they can work on together.

MEND coordinators continue to use the equipment purchased for the video conferencing project to stay in contact with each other and organize MEND activities and workshops.

Record of Discussion - Example

The following is a part of one of the discussions between Hebron, Tulkarem, and Al-Izzariya about nonviolence in Palestinian society. The coordinators were Yacoub, in Al-Izzariya, Nour, in Tulkarem, and Mohammed, in Hebron. The participants featured in this part of the discussion were Essam, Samer, Adham Yunis and Yamen.

Yacoub asked if they felt that nonviolence was simply a form of surrender.

Essam replied that nonviolence was not surrender, but simply a means of convincing two opposing parties to find a peaceful conclusion to a conflict, with minimum possible damage to everyone involved.

Samer then added that nonviolence, far from being a form of surrender must come from a strong and courageous person. He said that nonviolence requires constructive dialogue between conflicting parties to reach a peaceful resolution. The other participants then asked Samer what he suggested was required for such constructive dialogue to take place. Samer answered that third party intervention is often needed in order to bridge the views of two conflicting communities.

Adham Yunis added his own definition of nonviolence, suggesting that it was a whole way of life. He feels that it is important to try and practice nonviolence throughout all aspects of his daily life, particularly with reference to his own behavior and attitude towards others. He also said that patience was an integral part of nonviolence.

Essam then questioned whether, with an increase in violence, particularly during May, the safety and rights of those practicing nonviolence was guaranteed?

Adham replied that he thought that it was possible to guarantee the safety and rights of those practicing nonviolence, even in the face of violence against them.

Essam then asked if the group felt it was possible for the Palestinian people to practice nonviolence as a means of solving their problems, despite the current situation in Palestine.

Adham felt that this was indeed possible but it is important to ensure human rights when non-violently resisting an aggressor.

Essam also thought that we should not violently intervene.

Yacoub added that nonviolence was a way of life that has been very successful in the liberation of countries in a number of similar situations, such as in India. Nonviolence also requires a considerable amount of bravery, as many have died whilst trying to bring about change using nonviolence. Nonviolence is an active, rather than passive force. However, it is first important to identify firm goals during any nonviolent campaign, as well as ensuring a strong commitment to nonviolence. Strategies should be developed in order to reach the desired goal. It is also necessary to recognize the fact that there will be many hardships and difficulties. This has been evident in several nonviolent movements, such as the campaign in the West Bank town of Bil'in to change the path of the wall being built around the West Bank.

Essam then asked the group on what basis did they feel that nonviolence follows laws and regulations?

Nour said that he bases his application of nonviolence on respect for others and humanity. He focuses on the defeat of violence and how violence affects others.

Yamen added that nonviolence was not necessarily the obvious solution to a violent problem. People may think that the application of nonviolence is simply surrender; it is in fact extremely hard work. It is a more difficult path to follow than violence. It is also particularly challenging to successfully spread the ideas of nonviolence.

Adham mentioned a positive example of a successful nonviolent campaign at Birzeit University. The students sat in front of a checkpoint through the middle of a main road for a week which resulted in the removal of the barrier.

Mohammed focused on the definition of nonviolence as a way of life, and reiterated the need to associate it with human rights. He also mentioned the difficult and unique situation of the Palestinian people, who encounter regular excessive violence, whilst living under military occupation.