

Signs of hope: News from the West Bank

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [December 13, 2005](#) issue

Signs of hope from Israel and Palestinian are so rare that when two such signs emerge only 48 hours apart, it is time to rejoice. The first sign of hope was well reported. When Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stopped in Jerusalem on her way to the Asia-Pacific summit meeting, she was handed a memorandum that prompted her to delay her trip. The memorandum was from James Wolfensohn, international special envoy for Gaza's economic development. Tyler Marshall, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, reports that Wolfensohn, the respected former head of the World Bank, told Rice that her intervention was needed to resolve the "sticking points" over the border blockage.

Wolfensohn had been working in the region since last spring, when President Bush appointed him special envoy. He was given a mandate, Marshall wrote, "to help the Palestinians rebuild Gaza's shattered economy and connect the territory with the outside world." After half a year on the job, however, Wolfensohn has grown increasingly frustrated because he has been unable to rescue Gaza from sinking "into just what he had been sent to prevent: a large virtual prison with its seaport and borders closed, its airport a shambles and talks to open the entry points meandering."

Rice traveled to the West Bank, where she met with Palestinian officials who presented her with a bag of Gazan-grown green bell peppers—"a sample of what Gazan farms couldn't export." She started extensive negotiations with Israeli and Palestinian officials in both the West Bank and Israel. Before she resumed her journey to the Asian summit, she had her agreement—a passageway will be opened from Gaza into Egypt. By late November, green bell peppers could start flowing into the world market.

The second sign of hope received less attention. Two days after Rice's announcement, at a Washington, D.C., press conference Leila Sansour announced

the formation of the Open Bethlehem Project, an organization designed to develop the economy of the city of Bethlehem and rescue the birthplace of Christianity from economic stagnation. Sansour, a member of a prominent Bethlehem family and an accomplished documentary film director, called on the world's Christians to pledge support for the city's future. She also stressed the need to lift barriers, including Israel's security wall, which completely surrounds Bethlehem. Her project has the backing of Palestinian prime minister Mahmoud Abbas, Catholic archbishop of Jerusalem Michel Sabah and Bethlehem mayor Victor Batarseh, as well as the endorsement of Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu.

Sansour could have used some support from Senator Hillary Clinton (D., N.Y.), especially since the potential 2008 Democratic presidential candidate was in the area attending a memorial service for Israel's assassinated prime minister Yitzhak Rabin. Clinton, however, made statements endorsing the Israeli wall as a security necessity, even though the wall cuts deep into Palestinian territory. Israel's critics argue that the path of the wall suggests an alternate intention: by placing Israel's large settlement blocs on the Israeli side of the wall, they say, Israel virtually guarantees that those blocs will become a permanent part of the country.

Because they did not visit the West Bank, which includes Bethlehem, Hillary and husband Bill, who joined her on the trip, missed an opportunity to see firsthand the hardships that the wall has imposed on Palestinians. Doctors are separated from clinics, children and teachers from schools, farmers from their fields, and family members from other family members—all facts that Senator Clinton did not mention during her visit. Of course, both Clintons are well aware of the Palestinian situation and surely know something about the impact of the wall on Palestinian life. But they remained silent.

Perhaps one day they will regret their silence and their exclusive embrace of Israel's perspective. Should a time come when the Clintons choose to express their regret, or even repent of their silence and exclusive support for Israel, they will have an example to follow—one that comes from leaders of Hillary Clinton's own denomination, the United Methodist Church. In a statement in mid-November, more than half of the 164 retired and active Methodist bishops worldwide repented of their complicity in another moral issue in the Middle East, the "unjust and immoral" invasion and occupation of Iraq. In their statement, the bishops confess that "in the face of the United States administration's rush toward military action based on misleading information, too many of us were silent."

United Methodist leaders have spoken against the Iraq war in the past, but this is the first time that such a large number of bishops have confessed their failure to publicly challenge the buildup to the war. Bishops are not that different from politicians. They are all elected to their present offices, and that makes their words of repentance even more pertinent to public-office holders and political candidates:

"We confess our preoccupation with institutional enhancement and limited agendas while American men and women are sent to Iraq to kill and be killed, while thousands of Iraqi people needlessly suffer and die, while poverty increases and preventable diseases go untreated."