

# What's happened to our grads in Gaza? university asks

As the bombs fell on the Gaza Strip, Bethlehem University wondered and worried about the fate of its graduates there.

More than 400 of them live in Gaza.

Even now, though, the university can account for only two of them living in Gaza, where Israeli attacks have killed 1,300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis.

The rest of the graduates? "We don't know how they're doing, if they survived everything," said Brother Jack Curran, vice president for development at Bethlehem University on the West Bank.

Brother Curran, along with Baltimore Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden, who has served in the Holy Land, brought the stark realities of the region to students at Calvert Hall College High School during a Feb. 10 visit to the Towson school.

Nobody from the university can get into Gaza: They'd need permission from the Israeli military, which will not grant it, Brother Curran said.

And he said nobody who graduated from the university can get out of Gaza. They'd need permission from the Israeli military, which will not grant it.

Yes, in 2009, the students and graduates have Internet and cell phones.

"But when you're being bombed, and so many people are dying, you're not really checking on the Internet too much," Brother Curran said. "It's not your first priority."

Bethlehem University, the only Catholic university in the West Bank, prides itself on its diversity and harmony among students and faculty. Two-thirds of its estimated 2,300 students are Muslim; one-third, Christian.

Brother Curran, a LaSallian Christian Brother from Troy, N.Y., said living in the Holy

Land has dramatically altered his view of Muslims.

“Before I went to Bethlehem six years ago, I never knew a Muslim,” he said. “I mean, I heard of them because you see them on TV. And they have those turbans on their heads and most of the time on TV, they have guns, and they’re yelling in the streets.

“But,” he added, “when I went to Bethlehem, that’s not the kind of Muslims I saw – not the kind of Muslims I saw at the university, not the kind of Muslims I saw in Bethlehem. So I started thinking maybe what you see on TV is not the whole picture.”

The Christians and Muslims he sees get along, study together, visit each other’s homes, go to each other’s weddings.

“Jews and Muslims and Christians – they don’t always fight,” Brother Curran said. “And there are Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims and Christians who get along and try to get over all the craziness and try to be regular people and to rebuild people’s lives.”

Brother Curran said the 35-year-old university has been closed 12 times by the Israeli military but classes have continued, sometimes off-campus. Students face curfews, travel restrictions and military checkpoints, he said.

Bishop Madden, who spent nine years in the Holy Land working for a Vatican ecumenical organization, said people in Gaza endured poor living conditions even before the most recent attacks.

It’s one of the most heavily populated places on earth. Much of the water is not drinkable because of salinity. Food comes in through Israel but there’s no real port, and the border with Egypt is shut down. And the recent bombing destroyed thousands of buildings.

“More or less, it’s like a large prison camp; it really is,” Bishop Madden said.

In late December, Bethlehem University criticized the Israeli attacks on Gaza.

“The extraordinary and disproportionate amount of bombing carried out by Israel and the vast number of innocent Palestinian dead and injured, not to mention the physical destruction wrought upon the already-oppressed people of Gaza, makes us cry to Heaven for an immediate ceasefire, that leads to a lasting peace built on justice,” the university said in a statement.

Bishop Madden said Palestinians elected Hamas not because they favor terrorism, but because they didn’t want the corrupt Fatah in power. He distinguished between the military arm of Hamas and the social services branch, which he said helps many in the area.

The Hamas Islamic fundamentalist militia and political party states as its goals the destruction of the Jewish state of Israel and the creation of an Islamic state in all of historical Palestine.

On Dec. 28, Pope Benedict XVI called for an end to the violence in the Holy Land and asked the international community to do everything possible to help the Israelis and Palestinians find a solution to the current conflict. He said he is “profoundly saddened by the deaths, the wounded, the material damage, the suffering and the tears of the peoples victim to this tragic recurrence of attacks and reprisals.”

*Catholic News Service contributed to this article.*