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The following news concerns the West Bank.

Bible Society staff in Gaza under ‘unremitting pressure in a suffering society’

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WEST BANK — A report by the UBS Area Secretary for the Europe-Middle East Region, Peter Wigglesworth, of a trip he made to Gaza City in May paints a picture of Bible Society staff “under pressure 24 hours a day, every day” as they try to serve a community “in danger of falling apart into chaos.”

The visit came at a time when paramilitary security forces deployed by the ruling Palestinian party Hamas were making their presence felt on street corners, and the Fatah contingent were parading in the main square. Hamas brought in the 3,000-strong force in the face of what BBC News called “a crisis of insecurity and lawlessness in the Gaza Strip”.

But more telling than the presence of the militia, said Mr Wigglesworth, were the signs of a suffering society.

“Dilapidated buildings; piles of rubbish in the street; empty shops and people sitting around with nothing to do: the economic blockade is exacerbating the situation of the community to the extent that it is in danger of falling apart into chaos. It is in this context that the staff of the Bible Society are continuing their work.

“‘How can we minister to the spiritual needs of people unless we also minister to their physical needs?’ was the question the staff asked me. ‘Can we find more funds to purchase some of the practical necessities of life as a token of our care for the community?’ That’s a challenge that we have to face if we are to continue to witness to the Gospel in Gaza at this time of need.”

Mr Wigglesworth said it was impossible to describe the external pressures that the Bible Society staff are under for 24 hours a day, every day.

“There may come a time when even their fortitude, in the face of unremitting pressure, becomes more than they can sustain. We have to be realistic about this, and to have contingency plans for that day, if it arrives. But right now they need our

continuing prayer support so that they can continue to ‘live the Gospel’ as they witness to their people in Gaza.”

On a more positive note, the Bible Society shop, the target of threats earlier this year, is open for business. There have been no more overt threats to the property since that time, although staff members and their families are still receiving the occasional threatening phone call. The Bible Society programs in the community are also continuing.

There was also encouraging news about the Bible Society’s Living Stones centre in Bir Zeit, on the West Bank, the other target of attacks in January and February. There is now an advisory group supporting the work of the Centre, on which all the Churches in Bir Zeit are represented. The Churches are promoting the Centre both both in their own congregations and in the community.

“This is a case of good news emerging out of bad,” says Mr Wigglesworth, “and a promise of a better future. The Bible Society has also learned from this that they need to diversify their programs to address the needs of the whole Bir Zeit community, not just the Bir Zeit University students and the surrounding villages. And, with the input from the Churches in Bir Zeit, this is what they are starting to do.”

But he also sounded a note of caution.

“Although the support of the Churches provides a measure of protection, and though the economic situation is not the same as in Gaza, the staff are still the target of threats. They, too, are living with the pressure of being a small minority within a majority, most of whom show appreciation for what they do, but which also contains those who would rather they were not active in their community.” (627 words – WEST BANK.12.06.06)

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