

**State of Palestine
Palestine Liberation Organization
Negotiations Affairs Department**

December 3, 2013

Ms. Vera Baboun: Christmas Message from the Bethlehem Mayor

Dear all,

From a small grotto in Bethlehem a message of love, hope, justice and peace was spread all over the world.

Today, our little town has become even smaller due to the continued expansion of Israeli settlements, but the message of Jesus Christ remains in our hearts, overcoming with hope the despair of decades of living under a foreign occupation and being deprived of our rights.

In Bethlehem, despite the hardships, we have an obligation to look to the future with hope. We celebrate because an important part of our Old City has become a World Heritage Site at UNESCO and the works to repair the Nativity Church have begun under the patronage of H.E President Mahmoud Abbas.

Our private sector continues to invest despite the obstacles erected by the occupation, and our people continue to peacefully demonstrate against the injustices imposed upon them, while the international community merely watches sympathetically.

Once a year, the town of Bethlehem enters millions of homes worldwide through the figure born in this little grotto. Over 2000 years have passed since that moment, and the people of Bethlehem continue to protect and care for the places where the Holy Family left its legacy.

As the late Pope John Paul II told us during his visit to our town in 2000, "The pastors and shepherds of Bethlehem were your predecessors, your ancestors."

But Bethlehem is not a museum, nor just a wooden grotto. It is a living experience of a daily struggle for existence, for a just and lasting peace, and this is the Bethlehem we also share with the world. A Bethlehem that is a model of natural coexistence between Christians and Muslims, an example for the rest of the region.

A Bethlehem which is home to thousands of refugees who have been waiting for the fulfillment of their rights since 1948. A Bethlehem where Christian priests and nuns pray for the freedom of all the Palestinian people and the preservation of their land and livelihoods. Bethlehem and her people are a living call for freedom and dignity.

From the Nativity Square, we thank world leaders for the attention they have given for our country Palestine and our town of Bethlehem in particular. But it is time to take concrete action in order to preserve the hopes for a just peace in the region. As we continue the restorations of our Old City, we continue to call for the restoration of our lands and the return of our people.

We pray for this Christmas to enlighten the hearts of those who have the power to end decades of injustices and secure the establishment of a free and sovereign Palestinian State on the 1967 border with East Jerusalem as its capital, our twin city that has been completely separated from Bethlehem for the first time in 2000 years of Christianity, due to the Israeli settlement enterprise.

Every Christmas we say "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

May this Christmas give us, and our brothers and sisters around the world, the strength needed in order to celebrate Christmas 2014 having achieved the fulfillment of justice and peace for all the peoples of the world, including here in Palestine.