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CRISIS POINTS

War and Peace on Champollion Street

By Huda Lutfi February 8, 2011 4:49 pm

Crisis Points gathers personal accounts of moments of turmoil around the world.

CAIRO — As I write this I can hear the sounds of bullets, banging and shouting on Champollion Street, close to Liberation (Tahrir) Square in central Cairo.

I have lived for 13 years in this popular neighborhood, where I have worked as both a cultural historian and an artist. In all this time, it has been a safe and relatively quiet place, even when I walked through the streets late at night. But since the January uprising, people in our neighborhood have been experiencing daily terror: attacks on residents, the burning and looting of local shops and private property.

On Jan. 25, the first day of the protests, I saw a group of 20 young men carrying huge sticks attacking a small group demonstrating on our street; they had emerged out of the police station close by. I heard their leader shout, “Attack them now!” And they did.

The demonstrators however managed to repel the thugs, and eventually forced them to flee. Fearing future attacks, local groups of citizens’ watches were formed to protect each neighborhood, including ours. If it was not for them, I would not be able to walk safely on the street. These groups of young men are volunteering all their time and energy to protect us against such violence. As the

attacks continued, the Champollion committee of young people began to erect barricades on our street for more protection; they created checkpoints and organized night shifts to prevent further attacks. Despite such efforts, looting and burning of property continued in our street. Shops have closed, now people have little access to food and bread, as well as other daily necessities. Doors to apartment buildings, once always open, have been locked for security.

Two days ago at around 10 a.m., members of the citizens' committee stood on one side of the street; on the other, a group of attackers armed with machetes, sticks, Molotov cocktails and stones. One of these kids, no more than 17 years old, managed to mount the roof of the building next to ours and started hurling stones, glass bottles and firebombs at the defenders. I saw one of the Molotov bombs hit the opposite building and feared that the building was going to catch fire. From a short distance each group continued to hurl stones at the other until the vigilantes started to chant loudly: "We are one hand ... we are one hand ... we are one hand." This seemed to calm tempers, and then one of the vigilantes stepped forward, reached out to place a hand on the shoulder of one of the attackers. Suddenly, the tension dissipated and both groups dispersed peacefully.

In the last couple of days, I saw a new development; failing the use of violence the ruling national party is now adopting a psychological war tactic on the streets. I recently heard members of the ruling national party conducting discussions with ordinary people walking on the street, trying to convince them that the Tahrir protesters are a bunch of mercenaries receiving money from foreign "elements" to destroy the country. To support these protesters, they told them, would be tantamount to treason to Egypt. Moving to another group of people I heard a human rights lawyer explaining to some young men and women the importance of recognizing their rights as Egyptian citizens, telling them that what the protesters are demanding is the right to peacefully express their critique of the existing regime.

Although relative peace has now returned to our street, the young men of our neighborhood continue to watch over our safety day and night. No doubt the assumption of such responsibility in the absence of the local police force has empowered these young men, showing them one of many ways to assume civil

responsibility in their country.

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