

Vanunu – Free at Last

Bruce Kent

Bruce Kent went to Ashkelon with a group of other campaigners to greet Mordechai Vanunu on his release from prison. He works with the Movement for the Abolition of War (www.abolishwar.org.uk).

The afternoon of Thursday 22 April was unreal. A few of Mordechai Vanunu's supporters, including his indefatigable brother, Meir, were sitting together with him in the sunshine in the garden of St George's Cathedral, Jerusalem, chatting and cracking pistachio nuts. Only the day before he had been released from prison after 18 years, 11 of which were spent in absolute solitary confinement.

Mordechai, now 49, spoke with dignity and even a sense of humour. I well remember receiving letters from him with lots of little holes cut out by the censor. The offending words were usually 'nuclear'. One day we received, to our surprise, a letter with all the offending cut-out pieces enclosed. Reminded of this, Vanunu laughed. He had once managed to distract the guard so that instead of putting them in the bin he had managed to enclose the deletions in the letter itself.

During those 18 years many of his supporters worried that he might suffer permanent mental disorientation: for two years the light in his cell was left on permanently. But this small man sitting in front of us and asking his own questions – 'How old are you, Bruce Kent?' – was calm and entirely sane. Nevertheless, he is deeply disappointed that after serving his whole sentence he is still not free to leave the country.

That was Thursday. The day before, the atmosphere outside the prison in Ashkelon when he was released had been anything but calm. More than 150 supporters, some from Israel but the majority from other countries, had gathered by 8 a.m. They came from Britain, the United States, Japan, Hungary, Poland, Canada, Ireland, Norway and the Netherlands. From Minnesota came Nick and Mary Eoloff, the American couple who adopted Vanunu some years ago and who have visited him many times since. The actress Susan York was the best-known British representative, but we also had with us Jeremy Corbyn MP (Labour) and Colin Breed MP (Lib Dem), as well as the distinguished human rights

lawyer Benedict Birnberg. Well rehearsed in non-violence by the American Catholic Worker contingent, we stood dutifully behind the police barrier and held up our welcoming posters.

We were not alone. Numbers of very hostile people turned up. 'Traitor' was one of their more polite words. References to our parentage were made and posters of Vanunu were set on fire. Eggs splattered on a few backs.

As the release time approached, the tension increased and the number of cameras and microphones multiplied. The angry protesters were allowed close to the prison gates, with the police apparently outnumbered. Eventually some sort of cordon was organised. Since one Israeli newspaper had openly speculated on the possibility of someone shooting Vanunu, there was a certain anxiety. Finally we could see that inside the courtyard some sort of press conference was going on. Then, to mixed cheers and angry screams, Vanunu appeared at the gate, gave a victory sign, was bundled into a car, and driven off at high speed with a police escort. As an exercise in damage limitation by the Israeli authorities it was all a disaster.

The Defence Ministry security chief, Yehiel Horev, has been publicly criticised for his handling of the release. Already some of the restrictions imposed on Vanunu's activity are proving to be unworkable and are being interpreted in different ways by different authorities. There is nowhere in Israel where Vanunu can now live in security – let alone peace – given the hostility of the Zionist hard right. Yet it can do Israel no good whatsoever if Vanunu is attacked. Israelis might not like it, but the best way to cut its present losses would be to give Vanunu a passport and get him out of the country. Meanwhile, the courage of the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, Riah Abu el-Assal, in giving Vanunu sanctuary in St George's, deserves high praise. Vanunu is in serious danger.

Why this hostility? It is true that he broke his terms of employment when, in 1986, he revealed details to the *Sunday Times* about the Dimona nuclear plant and Israel's nuclear weapons programme. He had worked in the plant from 1976 to 1985. But sometimes moral obligations supersede legal ones. In Britain, Katherine Gunn and Clive Ponting both broke their civil service obligations for reasons of conscience and received public support for what they did. In his poem, 'I am your Spy', written in prison, Vanunu admits; 'I signed a form. Only now am I reading the rest of it.'

But there is much more to the hostility than this. Some of it relates to his conversion to Christianity, in Australia in 1986. One of the popular papers even had a picture of Vanunu, taken on the day of his release, flanked on both sides by clergymen in collars with a large headline over the whole story: 'Vanunu the Christian'. (Perhaps Israel is more accustomed to supportive rather than to critical Christians. The Baptist president of the United Christian Council in Israel, far from commenting on the 18 years and the ill treatment, could only say that Vanunu's bitterness and anger made him 'very pitiful'.)

Vanunu is also hated because, on the issue of Israel itself, he is clearly out of step with the Israeli majority; he has made it clear that he does not believe in a Jewish but a unitary state, where Jews and Palestinians coexist. 'Some of those who have turned Vanunu in to a hero are idealists who want to see a world free

of nuclear weapons,' the *Jerusalem Post* commented on 20 April. 'Others seek to exploit this issue to weaken Israel as part of their battle against the Jewish State.'

It is a curious argument. A state without nuclear weapons might want to pretend it had them in order to appear stronger than it is. But a state with nuclear weapons, according to standard deterrence theory, ought actually to be more secure if everybody knows that it has them. Vanunu – if one believes in deterrence – has therefore in fact increased Israel's security.

In fact, Israel cherishes official ambiguity because its major ally, the United States, wants it that way. There has been an American commitment since 1969 to avoid putting pressure on Israel on the nuclear weapons issue as long as Israel promises to continue with its ambiguous nuclear façade. This long-standing commitment was reaffirmed by President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. To be open about the possession of nuclear weapons is to risk a legal challenge from within the United States to the massive American funding without which Israel would not survive in its present form.

The accusation that Vanunu has yet to reveal secrets about Dimona which could be relevant today is simply nonsense. He was never in a senior position at the plant, and it is now nineteen years since he worked there. In two decades nuclear weapons technology has moved on a long way. Dr Frank Barnaby, once director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, has made this point repeatedly.

What Vanunu could tell the world about are the details of his 1986 kidnapping. That might be a mild embarrassment to the British and Italian governments since that conspiracy started in Britain and was completed in Italy, and no prosecutions have ever been attempted. It would hardly embarrass Israel, which takes some pride in the exploits of Mossad, its secret service.

For everyone else, Vanunu is one of the heroes of the age. His position has always been that nuclear weapons, not only those of Israel, should be eliminated and that there should be a democratic participation in the process of making that happen. In Israel the first parliamentary debate about its nuclear weapons programme in more than 35 years took place in 2000, and then only after an appeal to the Supreme Court. It lasted 52 minutes. Vanunu, at great cost to himself, has tried to lift the lid from a state secret. The editor of the *Sunday Times* said categorically that Vanunu neither asked for nor received financial reward.

His release comes at a moment of opportunity. In the spring of 2005 there will take place in New York what may possibly be the last review conference of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. If there are no positive results, the treaty may as well go in the dustbin of history. Despite its title, it is a treaty not just about proliferation, but also about the abolition of nuclear weapons.

This requirement is now even stronger since, in 1996, the International Court of Justice ruled that, 'there exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control.' A draft treaty already exists covering all aspects of this process, including inspection and verification. Next year offers what may be a last chance. Today at least eight countries possess nuclear

weapons and non-state organisations may well be trying to get their own. The list of nuclear accidents and miscalculations grows longer and longer as the history of the past 50 years is revealed. It is time to move from the reduction in numbers of nuclear weapons to nuclear weapons elimination.

Which is why I have a strong sympathy for the Israeli position. Were I a citizen of that country I would want to ask, 'why start with us?' It is, indeed, the five major nuclear weapons states that have led the way and it is for them to put the process in reverse. 'Do as I say not as I do' has never been a sound ethical position. Tony Blair could regain some of his lost credibility were he to come to the 2005 Non-Proliferation meeting with a promise to start abolition negotiations.

With grateful acknowledgements to The Tablet, 1 May 2004.

* * *

At the meeting of the European Network for Peace and Human Rights at the European Parliament in Brussels on 29/30 April 2004, the following communiqué was approved endorsing Mordechai Vanunu's appeal to Mohamed ElBaradei to inspect the Dimona facility.

We the undersigned participants in European Network for Peace and Human Rights endorse this statement:

1. We welcome the release of Mordechai Vanunu after 17-and-a-half years of wrongful imprisonment in Shikma prison in Ashkelon, following his kidnapping by Israeli agents;
2. We unreservedly condemn the new decision of the Israeli authorities henceforth to restrict Mr Vanunu's freedom of movement, to bar him from leaving the country, to limit his freedom of association, and to prevent him from meeting visitors from abroad or representatives of the media, to tap his telephone and to subject him to close surveillance;
3. We strongly support Mr Vanunu's call to remove all nuclear weapons from the Middle East. As he says in relation to Israeli nuclear weapons: 'Israel doesn't need nuclear arms, especially now that all the Middle East is free from nuclear arms...my message today to all the world is open the Dimona reactor for inspections. Call Mohamed ElBaradei [the International Atomic Energy Agency chief] to come and inspect the reactor.'
4. We recall the repeated demands at the United Nations General Assembly since 1987 for a nuclear-weapons free zone throughout the Middle East.
5. We believe that the existence of a developed nuclear arsenal in Israel shows how one-sided and specious are the calls of some powers for 'counter-proliferation', as distinct from 'non-proliferation'. No attempt has ever been made to persuade Israel, leave alone compel it, to forego nuclear weapons.
6. The case for a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the whole of the Middle East has always rested on the voluntary consent of the parties. It remains as strong as ever.