

Israel steps up military and economic warfare against Palestinians

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Israel has again stepped up its military offensive against the Palestinians, after almost two months of confrontation.

Continuing violence yesterday—a car bomb in Israel and the shooting by Israeli troops of four Palestinians, including a leading member of the Fatah militia—has brought the death toll to well over 250.

Fighting continues to rage in the aftermath of Israeli missile strikes on Palestinian security targets—taken in retaliation for the November 20 bombing of a Jewish settlers' school bus in Gaza. The Israeli government immediately blamed “Tanzim” militants from President Yassir Arafat's Fatah organisation for the bomb that killed an Israeli man and woman and injured four children—though Fatah denied any involvement. This was used as a pretext for Israel to launch missile attacks by five helicopter gunships on naval, civil defence and police installations in Gaza, as well as the main Palestinian police headquarters.

Nearby the European Union's special Middle East envoy Miguel Angel Moratinos was meeting with Arafat at his personal office. The next day, Israeli troops shot dead three Palestinians while a fourth died later of his wounds. Egypt has recalled its ambassador from Israel in protest at the recent missile attacks and the Palestinian Authority has said it will authorise its police to fire on Israeli troops in order to protect protestors.

Israeli settler attacks on Palestinians have also increased steadily over the past few weeks. The Palestinian-Israeli organisation, *Alternative Information Center*, has reported numerous attacks by settlers on Palestinians going about their every day life. These settlers are free to carry out intimidation, attacks against people and property and even murder, secure in the knowledge that the Israeli military and justice system is reluctant to arrest, try and punish them.

In the weeks since the violence started, the settlers have burned hundreds of acres of Palestinian land and stopped Palestinians from gathering olives at what is now the height of the season. They have cut water pipes to the villages and shot at Palestinians in residential areas that have been under curfew for more than a month.

Mary Robinson, the UN Human Rights Commissioner, toured the Palestinian territories two weeks ago. She saw children in hospital whose eyes had been blown out by Israeli bullets and 40,000 Palestinians kept under curfew for six weeks in Hebron so that the 400-strong Jewish enclave, armed to the teeth, could go about their business. Robinson said that rarely had a people been

so obvious need of international protection.

Economic blockade

Not only has Israel used the might of one of the largest armed forces in the world against unarmed Palestinians, it has laid siege to the Palestinian Territories for nearly two months. Israel has refused entry to 120,000 Palestinian workers who have jobs in Israel, blocked Palestinian exports, which must go through Israeli ports, and held up tax transfers to the Palestinian Authority.

Since the start of the fighting, Israel has sealed off the West Bank and the Gaza Strip from the outside world. It has closed all land routes to Egypt and Jordan, bringing external trade to a standstill. The closure of export markets has created a glut of goods and a fall in the price producers can obtain on the local market. Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, which has little local storage capacity, have had to watch their agricultural produce rot.

The Israeli authorities have refused to clear Palestinian imports through the ports of Ashdod and Haifa. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Information, at the end of last month more than 800 containers of commodities ranging from equipment to building materials and medicines, and approximately 1,000 cars were held up at Ashdod. Palestinian exports that must go through Israeli checkpoints are stopped.

Speaking of the economic consequences of the border closures, Mohammad Shtayyeh, managing director of the private sector Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction, said, "A more potent danger is that they reflect a strategy to isolate and weaken the Palestinian economy, which will only reinforce the cycle of violence and conflict."

Even more devastating, the 120,000 Palestinian workers now barred from travelling to work in Israel represent one quarter of the 600,00 workforce in paid employment. With about 40 percent unemployment, they were often the main breadwinners. Now that lifeline too has gone. \$3.4m in remittances from those working in Israel is lost every single day. As wages are higher in Israel, it means a loss of 30 percent in the income of the Palestinian economy, increasing both poverty and tension.

A system of Israeli army checkpoints, concrete barricades, and bulldozed roads has cut off all movement between Palestinian towns, cities and villages, while Jerusalem is strictly off limits to West Bank residents. Palestinian Authority officials, managers, traders and factory workers cannot get to their place of work within the Occupied Territories. Palestinians are locked in their communities unable to work, take their produce to market or see

their families. Children cannot get to school.

There have been 80 percent cuts in production and 70 percent cuts in the service sector as a result. The banks are unable to clear cheques as people cannot get to work and payments are held up, causing further hardship. Tourism has come to a complete halt. Preparations for the Bethlehem end of the millennium celebrations have been cancelled.

The Palestinian economy and trade ministry estimates that the siege has cost at least \$345m in its first month. A report by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees puts losses at \$4m a day, with a further \$229m lost because of Israeli trade restrictions. The World Bank said that the decline in gross national product could reach \$630m for the year 2000, with income per capita falling by 11 percent.

There are also reports of soldiers bulldozing olive groves and banana plantations on the outskirts of Jericho, ostensibly for "security reasons".

After several weeks of legally reducing tax transfers due to the Palestinian Authority, Israel has now stopped them altogether. On Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak revived the policy of his predecessor Benjamin Netanyahu, who had stopped the transfers in 1997. Barak said he was stopping the monthly payments of \$60m "as part of our demand that the other side too will abide by agreements".

Under the 1994 Paris economic protocol, Israel must transfer each month petroleum, purchase and VAT taxes owed to the Palestinian Authority (PA). On average, Israel pays the PA back 160m ILS (Israeli New Shekels — \$39m) in excise and other taxes after both sides submit their import invoices. Usually, however, Israel then deducts payments for electricity and telecoms provided by the Israeli monopolies. Last month Israel transferred only 30m ILS, and now payments have stopped altogether.

Jean Breteche, the European Commission's representative in the West Bank and Gaza, said, "Israel is in breach of the Paris economic protocol". Despite the fact that this comes on top of other Israeli breaches of EU trade regulations and conventions, however, the European Union refused to take any action against Israel. Its one action was to authorise the use of 27m euros (\$23m) from its "Special Cash Facility" in order that Palestinian Authority Chairman Yassir Arafat would be able to pay the huge wage bill for his numerous police and security forces. The last thing the imperialist powers want is for Arafat to be denied the possibility of policing the social and political discontent of the Palestinian masses.

The legacy of the Oslo Accord

All this comes on top of the truly awful decline in living standards since the signing of the Oslo Accord in 1993. The fiction of a separate economic development for the Palestinians has driven the majority into ever worsening poverty. The situation deteriorated drastically after 1996, as the Israelis instituted a policy of closure that wrecked the Palestinian economy. Production fell. Markets shrank. Dependency on Israel increased. The standard of living fell by nearly half.

The collapse in living standards was accompanied by corruption, fraud, mismanagement, and corruption on a massive scale by Arafat's Palestinian Authority. Little of the foreign aid reaches its

intended target. Much ends up in the private bank accounts of Arafat's cronies. Despite the appalling housing conditions for the overwhelming majority—most of whom live in refugee camps—much of the construction in Gaza has produced luxurious seaside villas for Arafat and his henchmen. His 14 security forces take most of the public sector budget.

Under such conditions, democracy, equality and political rights stood no chance. Dissension is suppressed by the routine use of midnight arrests, detention, torture and summary executions.

But all this is only one part of the economic catastrophe caused by the Zionist state. The desperate plight of the 3.4m Palestinians refugees has been totally ignored. More than 50 years after their expulsion and dispersion in 1948 throughout the Middle East, they have been left homeless, stateless and uncompensated. Thirty-two years of Israeli occupation brought further untold losses to the Palestinians. Homes were demolished as a form of collective punishment, the economies of the West Bank and Gaza were wrecked, and thousands of acres of land were expropriated.

The Palestinian Accord, established under Oslo, was also complicit in a further land grab for Zionist settlements—always a key Israeli objective—in defiance of international conventions on land seized in war and numerous UN resolutions. As Binyamin Netanyahu, the former Prime Minister told CNN, "[Labour Prime Minister Yitzakh] Rabin, in fact, who was my predecessor and who signed the Oslo Accords, boasted that he could build settlements under the agreement. In point of fact he expanded the population of the settlement by 50 percent. We're [Likud] nowhere near there." And under Barak, the expansion of the settlements has increased. The settlers, protected by the army, live as an extra-territorial privileged people with rights denied to resident Palestinians, while Israel controls Palestinian water resources, as well as its exits and entrances.

The ability of Israel to wreak this economic devastation points to the utterly fraudulent nature of the Oslo Accord and Palestinian "autonomy". Far from inaugurating a new era of peace and prosperity, the post-1993 arrangements have locked Palestinians into so many isolated cages, reinforced the Zionist settlements and tied economic development in the Occupied Territories to Palestinian acceptance of a new form of Israeli domination.

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[20 November 2000]

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