Israeli Defence Force massacres inhabitants of Beit Rima

An Israeli correspondent
29 October 2001

The assassination of Tourism Minister Rehavam Ze'evi gave the Israeli Defence Force and the Likud-Labour coalition government a reason to invade the Palestine Authority (PA) territories. The declared aim of the IDF military action was to imprison the assassins of Ze'evi. The Israeli cabinet endorsed the action, even though Prime Minister Ariel Sharon did not show any maps of the incursions to his Labour coalition partners. The result was the massacre of innocent people, the demolition of houses, the uprooting of plantations and violence against women and children. Yet the Israeli foreign minister, Labour's Shimon Peres, and Labour Defence Minister Binjamin Ben-Eliezer both defended the action.

IDF troops withdrew early Thursday morning from the West Bank village of Beit Rima. Palestinian West Bank security chief Jibril Rajoub termed the raid a "massacre." A senior aide to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat called the Israeli incursions "a crime and real terror." Ten Palestinians were killed during clashes with the IDF on Wednesday; five of them members of the Palestinian national security forces led by General Jibril Rajub. The excuse for the massacre was the claim that the village had served as a base for last week's assassination of Ze'evi.

Palestinians said that up to nine civilians were killed in the clashes. IDF West Bank commander, Brigadier-General Gershon Yitzhak, confirmed that five had been killed, but said that it was possible that a sixth person was also killed in the operation.

The five confirmed civilian deaths were all residents of the village. Three other Palestinians were killed on Wednesday night during an IDF incursion into the West Bank city of Tul Karm. The three were Iman al-Jaled, 20, Mahmoud al-Jaled, 25, and Salah al-A'asi, 19. Palestinian officials also have a list of at least 23 residents of Beit Rima who have been arrested, several of them brothers or members of the same family. The exact number of wounded who have been taken to Israeli hospitals is not known.

"We arrested part of the cell that killed the minister," said Yitzhak, adding he did not know if the actual assassins were among those detained. "This is the village that the killers... come from." Yitzhak rejected Palestinian allegations that the army had carried out a massacre in the village. He said his troops had come under attack by Palestinian gunmen and returned fire.

Army officials said about eleven suspected militants of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Tanzim and Hamas groups were under arrest, out of a list of 15 suspects being sought. They said five Palestinians were confirmed dead, "all of them identified as terrorists." The PFLP had claimed responsibility for killing Ze'evi, so the arrest of Tanzim [the military wing of Yasser Arafat's Fateh] and Hamas members has no possible justification and should be seen as part of a trawling operation by the IDF.

The IDF confirmed that it had prevented ambulances from entering the area in which the shooting took place, but said that the wounded were taken care of by the army and had been evacuated to the Sheba Medical Center in Tel Hashomer.

Eyewitness reports said that the IDF had demolished two buildings in the village, burned another one down, and taken over several residential buildings. In response, the army said that the buildings that had been destroyed belonged to families of the Palestinians who had assassinated Ze'evi.

A few hours after the Israeli occupation forces left Beit Rima, the streets of the village were full of hundreds of visitors to the owners of the three houses the army demolished and the home that had burned down due to the use of IDF tear gas and stun grenades.

The houses demolished on Wednesday belonged to the Barghouti family, whose son Bilal is accused of being a

© World Socialist Web Site

Hamas activist who has gone underground. The first belonged to Ahmed Yusuf, whose son Shiraq has been under arrest in Israel for the last six months as a suspect in a car bombing, and whose son-in-law, Mohammed Rimawi, is under arrest as a suspect in the Ze'evi assassination. The second house demolished was the family home of Abdel Rahman Asmar, whose son, Basel is also suspected of murdering Ze'evi. The houses were destroyed with explosives, with the blast causing damage to many of the homes nearby and knocking out the electricity for the entire village. Six families, numbering 35 people, lived in the houses. They were not allowed to remove their possessions before their homes were blown up.

The burned house belongs to Yusuf el-Alab. The family was in Ramallah during the raid and because of the curfew there, were not able to return to the village. According to reports, IDF troops conducting house-to-house searches did not believe there was nobody at home and threw a tear gas grenade and a stun grenade into the house, which caused the blaze.

In the past week, 14-year-old Naser Qura'n from Qalqilia died of gunshot wounds sustained during the Israeli shelling of the West Bank town. The Palestinian boy was shot in the chest and abdomen when Israeli tanks shelled civilian homes in Qalqilia. That same day, IDF forces killed two Palestinians, Talat Jaber (19) and Badir Al Sha'er (50) from Tulkarem when a tank opened fire on them. Mohammad Al Samana died at Ramallah hospital due to gunshot wounds sustained earlier that week.

The Israeli right wing felt strengthened by the latest IDF incursions. Zionist settlers shot six Palestinians in Beni Naim, east of Hebron. Two are in critical condition and one has been declared clinically dead. The six were driving in a service taxi on their way to work, when the settlers opened fire. The settler parties demanded that the government reject appeals by Washington for an immediate withdrawal. The Labour ministers were muted in their own appeal for Sharon to withdraw as soon as possible and refused to condemn the action.

The Israeli press was also generally supportive of the action. The right-wing *Jerusalem Post* urged Arafat's removal as head of the Palestinian Authority, "following the example of the Serbs, who eventually ousted Slobodan Milosevic after his failed war in Kosovo." In the meantime, "with or without Arafat, Israel will have no choice other than to continue to destroy the terrorist infrastructure and implement the unilateral separation plans that limit Israeli vulnerability."

The right wing continues to draw strength from the political collaboration of the Labour Party, as well as the equivocal response of the Western powers. All of the major powers opposed the invasion into PA territory by the IDF, but despite a general belief that Sharon's actions are detrimental to US efforts to maintain Arab support for its war against Afghanistan, there is little indication of any willingness to directly challenge Sharon. As the attack on Beit Rima was underway, Britain's Foreign Office minister Peter Hain told reporters, "We deplore all assassinations, all terrorist attacks, whether suicide bombs in Tel Aviv or terrorist acts in the occupied areas." Barely 24 hours later, Hain was forced to retract his remarks after Israeli protests. He assured Sharon's government, "I am not for one moment equating Israel's actions in the occupied territories with terrorist acts. Israel is a legitimate government with an army."

A major consideration for the West is to neutralize the obvious parallels between Sharon's brutal actions against the Palestinians and the US bombing of Afghanistan. The Bush administration has already sought to define terrorism as an action committed by a non-state grouping—as opposed to states that are accused of "sponsoring" terrorism—in order to shield itself from any possible censure. Therefore Hain's earlier equation of army actions by a state with terror was potentially damaging to US interests. Sharon has repeatedly called on the US to endorse his military drive against the PA as part of the so-called war against terrorism, a position that enjoys some support within the Republican administration, despite the danger of alienating the Arab states.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site