

With Washington's tacit support, Sharon steps up West Bank assault

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9 April 2002

With a wink and a nod from the US government, Israeli military forces are intensifying their pillaging of Palestinian cities on the West Bank, destroying utilities, buildings and other infrastructure, demolishing entire neighborhoods with tanks, artillery and air strikes, and killing hundreds.

Virtually the entire urban population of the West Bank is under siege, deprived of access to food, running water, electrical power, prescription drugs and other necessities. There were reports Monday that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) were preparing to launch similar attacks on cities and refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, which have not been targeted in the current offensive.

Perhaps the cruelest tactic employed by the Sharon government is the blocking of ambulances and even foot traffic into hospitals, ensuring that any Palestinian seriously wounded by gunfire, shells or bombs will subsequently die.

In one incident, a Palestinian man, wounded in the stomach and hand, was brought within four yards of the front door of Al Razi Hospital in Jenin. Israeli soldiers in a tank unit would not permit doctors and other staff to move the victim inside, and he died after several hours.

Humanitarian organizations said the Israeli military was deliberately disrupting aid and medical operations for the Palestinian population. Marie-Louise Weighill of Save the Children told the BBC, "The Israeli chain of command on the streets is breaking down and there is no respect for the humanitarian missions. The Israeli Defense Forces are not allowing any humanitarian agencies to operate in areas under their control." The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said that its medical personnel had been "prevented from performing their life saving duties."

In an hour-long speech to the Israeli Knesset Monday, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon vowed to continue the onslaught on the West Bank until Israel had completely dismantled what he called the "terror infrastructure," which he identified with Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority. He gave no indication as to how long this would take, while saying that in a telephone conversation with US President Bush he had promised "every effort to accelerate" the operation.

These comments expose the elaborate pretense of the Bush administration that the US is trying to hold back Sharon. Sections of the American media are even suggesting that there is a sharp conflict between the Israeli regime and the United States over the methods being employed on the West Bank, and that Sharon is

"defying" the United States.

Bush's Rose Garden speech Thursday, when he announced that Secretary of State Colin Powell would visit the Middle East and urged Israel to show restraint, was followed by comments Saturday, at a press briefing with visiting British Prime Minister Tony Blair, calling on Sharon to halt the offensive "without delay."

On the Sunday television interview programs, both Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice danced around the question of a timetable for Israel to halt its military onslaught. "The president doesn't give orders to a sovereign prime minister of another country," Powell said Sunday—a comment which ex-leaders of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan might dispute.

Rice told CNN that Bush wanted an Israeli withdrawal but "understands that it can't be helter-skelter and chaotic." This is a most cynical pretext, given that chaos is precisely the result of the Israeli invasion, which has destroyed much of the economic and social infrastructure of an area that is home to three million people.

The clearest proof that the Bush administration is encouraging, not restraining, Israeli violence, is the decision to send Powell to the Middle East by the slowest possible route. He will visit Arab leaders in Morocco and Egypt, then zigzag west to Madrid for talks with European foreign ministers, before arriving in Israel as late as Friday, April 12—thus giving Sharon eight days, from the time of Bush's initial announcement—to arrest and kill as many Palestinians as possible.

The hypocrisy of the US government is further underscored by the contrast between Powell's posture toward Sharon and his attitude to Arafat. Powell has announced he will meet in Jerusalem with Sharon—who is supposedly defying American wishes—while he has refused to commit himself to even meeting with Arafat—who has declared his unconditional support for Bush's intervention.

The reality is that the Sharon government has little more independence of Washington than the Central Command of General Tommy Franks in Afghanistan. The Israeli military is entirely dependent on US weaponry, from jet fighters and helicopter gunships to ammunition and fuel. The Israeli economy and government could not function for a week without US financial backing. If Sharon disregards US statements about pulling out of the West Bank it is because he has been assured that these are merely for public consumption, especially in the Arab states.

If the US government were intent on halting the Israeli offensive immediately, it would have no problem doing so. A relevant historical precedent underscores this political fact.

In 1956, when Britain, France and Israel made a concerted attack on Egypt, seizing the Suez Canal and threatening to move on to Cairo and oust the nationalist regime of Nasser, the Eisenhower administration intervened decisively. The American government at that time considered the military action, aimed at protecting the oil interests of British and French corporations and boosting the flagging influence of the former colonial powers in the Middle East, to be inimical to US economic and geopolitical aims in the region. Washington was intent on supplanting the European powers as the dominant force in the oil-rich area.

American diplomatic threats and financial pressure on the British pound and the French franc brought London, Paris and their Israeli ally quickly into line. All three countries withdrew their troops from Egyptian soil and British Prime Minister Anthony Eden, the principal architect of the invasion, abruptly resigned.

The heaviest fighting over the weekend took place in and around the northern West Bank cities of Jenin and Nablus. At least 100 Palestinians have been killed fighting to defend their homes in the refugee camp just outside Jenin, while at least 7 Israeli soldiers have been killed and 30 wounded.

The Israeli advance has been slow, despite the enormous superiority in weaponry—helicopter gunships, tanks, bulldozers and artillery, against small arms and homemade bombs. Israeli military officials described the resistance as desperate and intense. An unknown number of dead and wounded have been buried under the rubble of houses smashed down by tanks and bulldozers.

Nearly all the population has fled the camp in the course of six days of fighting that have virtually destroyed it. There is no electricity or water, and little food, and medical workers have been barred from entering the camp since Thursday, leaving many wounded to bleed to death.

Dozens of Palestinians have been killed in Nablus, where the battle is still raging in the old quarter of the city. Narrow streets and closely packed houses make tank operations there more difficult. Hundreds of Palestinian fighters manned barricades or holed up in the drainage pipes that run under the city. Helicopter gunships reportedly fired over 200 missiles at the center of the city, once home to more than a quarter million people.

Each one of these missiles carries a greater charge than the 40 pounds of explosives worn by the suicide bomber who killed 27 Israelis at a Passover Seder in Netanya—the incident used as the pretext for Sharon's policy of reconquest of the West Bank.

Suicide bombing is denounced as “terrorism” because it deliberately targets innocent Israeli civilians. What other label can be applied to the launching of hundreds of powerful missiles into a densely populated Palestinian city, knowing that the result will be hundreds, if not thousands, of deaths?

The American media cannot be bothered with history, or with a serious examination of the political arguments being made by either Bush or Sharon. It proceeds with an extraordinary double standard, reporting—in some cases quite vividly—outrages being committed by Israeli forces, while branding Arafat and the Palestinians as the “terrorists.”

Washington Post reporter Monday described the Israeli assault as “ravaging” Bethlehem, wrecking homes, shops and civic buildings, destroying cars, appliances and other property, and detaining, abusing and beating civilians.

Some 200 Palestinians, including the city’s governor and many other officials of the Palestinian Authority, have taken sanctuary in the Church of the Nativity, protected by dozens of Palestinian Christian priests and friars. The IDF has declared the Palestinians “terrorists” and the clergymen “hostages,” although the Roman Catholic Church has rejected this description.

A mentally impaired church bell-ringer was killed in the initial Israeli onslaught on the church. After Israeli troops fired into the church compound a second time, setting fire to part of the facility and killing a Palestinian policeman, a spokesman for custodians of Catholic sites in the Holy Land, Fr. David Jaeger, denounced the attack as “a violation of every law of humanity and civilization.”

According to Jessica Montell, executive director of the Israeli human rights group B’Tselem, soldiers operating on the West Bank act with impunity. “There’s no accountability,” she told the *Post*. “There’s no investigation. It’s like boys with no supervision who go crazy. There’s no sense that these are human beings like them, who are victims. It’s hard to find any security justification for what appears to be vandalism and wanton destruction.”

B’Tselem and three other human rights groups pressed their allegations of torture by the Israeli military, going to Israel’s High Court Sunday to charge that Palestinians at the Ofer detention camp had their toes broken as an interrogation tactic. The High Court refused to act, citing the absence of Palestinian witnesses—these, of course, are for the most part still in detention.

Another barbaric action for which the Sharon government is responsible is the practice of using Palestinians as human bomb detectors. Several Palestinians have described being forced at gunpoint to precede Israeli soldiers into offices and buildings so that they would set off any booby traps or bombs, or receive sniper fire. Israeli military spokesmen admitted compelling civilians to enter buildings ahead of invading troops, claiming that their function was “only to give directions” because they were “familiar with the building.”

At the same time, the Israeli military has closed off much of the West Bank to the international press, and attacked American and other foreign reporters with stun grenades and rubber bullets. Last week a reporting team from the US cable news network MSNBC was arrested by Israeli soldiers when it sought to cover US envoy Anthony Zinni’s visit to Arafat in the Palestinian leader’s besieged Ramallah headquarters.

One can only imagine the US media outcry if any of these actions were being carried out by Palestinians rather than Israelis.



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