

Bush defends Sharon as Jenin massacre provokes international condemnation

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Denunciations of Israeli brutality in Jenin have been voiced throughout the world, with just one notable exception. The Bush administration has not only maintained its steadfast support for the government of Ariel Sharon, but has all but abandoned the pretence that it is seeking an Israeli military withdrawal from the West Bank.

Speaking to reporters in the Oval Office as he met with Secretary of State Colin Powell on his return from Israel, Bush praised Sharon as a “man of peace”, while criticising Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat for not bringing an end to “terrorism.”

Most significant of all, when asked if he was troubled that there was still a major Israeli military presence on the West Bank two weeks after he had called for an immediate withdrawal, Bush declared, “History will show that they responded”. Sharon, he added, “gave me a timetable and he’s met the timetable.”

Bush’s reference to an agreed timetable between himself and Sharon is proof of direct US complicity in the ongoing war-crimes being perpetrated on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. They confirm the analysis of the real purpose of Powell’s trip made by the *World Socialist Web Site* on April 6, “Bush ‘peace initiative’ prepares ground for wider war against Arab masses”.

We insisted that Powell’s dispatch to the Middle East, “in no way represents a shift in the basic policy of the United States in the Middle East.” Its primary purpose was, “to buy time for the Israeli regime and provide it with a political cover to intensify its assault on the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian people.”

This is now so apparent on its face that Bush’s spokesman Ari Fleischer was reduced to making the ludicrous claim that the president did not *intend* to signal to the Israelis that he was backing away from his demand for immediate withdrawal. But nothing can now disguise the fact that the US has given the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) a license to terrorise thousands of innocent civilians trapped in the Palestinian refugee camps throughout the West Bank.

The worst atrocities have occurred in Jenin. Bulldozers

were sent in to flatten inhabited houses to prepare the way for tanks and armoured cars. The army then proceeded to indiscriminately target and destroy homes, factories, essential facilities and other buildings by using fighter jets and helicopter gunships

After the loss of 13 soldiers to Palestinian snipers, the IDF began utilising anti-aircraft weapons that fire 3,000 20-millimetre rounds a minute to destroy houses in which Palestinian fighters were said to be sheltering. In order to conceal its military operations from any prying journalists, the army produced a cordon of smoke to screen off the areas of fighting. A report appeared that one pilot of a helicopter gunship hovering above Jenin last week repeatedly refused to fire on a building said to contain “terrorist suspects”, for fear of killing civilians. The pilot has not been named, and it is not yet known if action will be taken against him.

Even the most conservative estimates of those left dead after the Israeli pull-out of Jenin are in the hundreds. There have been reports of unretrieved bodies, some in a state of decomposition and of the victims of Israeli terror being concealed in mass graves. A senior Palestinian spokesman, Nabil Shaath, has accused Israel of carrying out between 60 and 70 summary executions and removing corpses in refrigerated trucks: “The Israeli army took six days to complete its massacre in Jenin and six days to clean it up.” Up to 500 people had been killed, he claimed.

On entering the camp, observers have described scenes of total devastation—“a lunar landscape” is how one reporter described what he saw.

The United Nations envoy to the Middle East, Terje Roed-Larsen, described Jenin as, “shocking and horrifying beyond belief.” Roed-Larsen said 300 buildings were destroyed and 2,000 people were left homeless: “I’ve just been witnessing two brothers digging out of the rubble their father and five other family members. I witnessed a family digging out their about 12-year-old son from beneath the rubble. There’s a stench of decaying corpses all over the place here, the scene is absolutely unbelievable ... No military operation could justify the suffering we are seeing here.”

British forensic expert Professor Derrick Pounder of Dundee University, part of an Amnesty International team granted access to Jenin, said that the evidence points to large numbers of civilian dead. Regarding the numerous eyewitness accounts of civilian deaths, he said, “I must say that the evidence before us at the moment doesn’t lead us to believe that the allegations are anything other than truthful and that therefore there are large numbers of civilian dead underneath these bulldozed and bombed ruins that we see.”

He added that post mortems on two bodies had “given cause for suspicion”. The autopsy carried out on a 38-year-old Palestinian revealed that “he was either shot in the foot, and then in the back, or shot in the back first—receiving a fatal wound—and his corpse was for some reason shot in the foot.”

The *Mirror*’s David Pilditch said of Jenin, “It was like the aftermath of some huge earthquake. Steep alleyways filled with rubble, not one single home left intact and the corrosive, suffocating smell of rotting corpses. But this was no natural catastrophe. This was a grim, man-made scene of absolute destruction in the Jenin refugee camp yesterday, a grotesque theatre of hatred and savage epicentre of Israel’s Operation Defensive Wall campaign.”

He interviewed Jumana Hassan, 24, who told him that soldiers had gathered bodies together and blew them up to hide the evidence. Jumana said: “There were six men whose bodies were lying in the street. They were left for days. They threw them into a pile. There was an explosion and there was nothing left of their bodies.”

In the face of these reports, even the most ardent defenders of Israeli actions in Europe have been forced to issue protests.

Britain’s Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said Israel should accept an outside investigation of its actions in Jenin, possibly by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). He believed that “all available evidence” indicates that Israeli forces in Jenin used “disproportionate and excessive force” and criticised Israel’s reticence to accept outside scrutiny as being, “distressing above all to Israel’s friends.”

Chris Patten, the EU’s external relations commissioner, told the *Guardian* newspaper, “It is in Israel’s interest to behave like a democracy that believes in the rule of law. There has to be movement, and movement fast, to enable the international community to deal with this calamity.”

He also made clear that he was speaking as a friend of Israel, in order to head off any genuine demand for the Sharon government to be brought to book for its war crimes. “If Israel simply refuses all the genuine calls for humanitarian assistance; if it resists any attempt by the international media to cover what is going on, *then*

inevitably it is going to provide oxygen for all those who will be making more extreme demands,” Patten warned [emphasis added].

In a parliamentary debate in Britain, prominent Jewish Labour MP Gerald Kaufman denounced Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon as a war criminal and said, “His actions are staining the Star of David with blood.”

In an April 19 op-ed piece for the *Mirror* newspaper, Kaufman also made clear that the motivation for his attack was concern for the survival of Israel: “In the wider world, the devastation in Jenin and Bethlehem is turning countless fair-minded people into harsh critics of the Israelis... Far from protecting the Jewish state, the policies being followed by Prime Minister Sharon are undermining not only its international reputation, but its very existence.”

The actions of the IDF in Jenin has indeed gravely undermined the standing of Israel on a world scale and threatened its very survival. But in doing so, they will by extension provoke a growing wave of political hostility towards its US backers. The Bush administration’s claim to be conducting a “war against terrorism” cannot be sustained while it continues to act as the main sponsor and apologist for Sharon’s murderous regime. The angry protests throughout both the Arab regimes and within Europe itself will continue to escalate. It is this that accounts for the growing nervousness of the European political elite regarding both Sharon’s actions and the nakedly pro-Israeli stance of the US. Kaufman, previously a shadow foreign secretary, made his own concerns clear, warning that Sharon had “made it impossible” for the US to take action against Iraq: “To do so would be to unite the whole Muslim world against the United States.”



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