

Israel reneges on investigation of Jenin atrocities

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After a Tuesday night cabinet meeting, the government of Ariel Sharon reversed its decision to cooperate with a UN investigation into the deaths of Palestinians at the refugee camp outside Jenin, on the West Bank. Cabinet spokesmen suggested the UN probe would have to shift its focus to include Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel, or it might be barred from entering the devastated camp, which is still surrounded by Israeli troops.

The Jenin investigation was approved by a unanimous 15-0 Security Council vote April 19, after an Arab-sponsored resolution which also called for immediate withdrawal of Israeli military forces from the West Bank was blocked by the threat of a US veto. Both the Bush administration and the Sharon government initially declared their support for a UN probe. Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres declared, "Israel has nothing to hide."

Evidently, Sharon and the Israeli Defense Forces high command feel differently. As soon as UN Secretary General Kofi Annan announced the composition of the investigatory commission—former Finnish President Marti Ahtisaari, as chair, together with Sadako Ogata, former UN high commissioner for refugees, and Cornelio Sommaruga, former head of the International Committee of the Red Cross—the Israeli government began to balk.

First, the Israelis protested that the panel should be "more balanced," including military and counter-terrorism experts as well as those with backgrounds in humanitarian aid work. Annan accommodated these concerns by adding to the commission Major General William Nash, a retired US army officer with experience in the Persian Gulf War and Kosovo.

Then the Israelis objected to any participation by Sommaruga, who has previously criticized Israeli human rights violations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The Sharon government had already vetoed three other UN officials as potential members of the commission: Terje Roed-Larsen, the UN representative for Mideast talks; UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson; and Peter Hansen, head of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees.

After a visit to Jenin last week, Roed-Larsen expressed outrage over the Israeli military's destruction of the camp, declaring, "Combating terrorism does not give a blank check to kill civilians." The Israeli press launched a smear campaign against the Norwegian diplomat, who played a key role in the 1993 Oslo accords, branding him an apologist for terrorism.

When Iraqi President Saddam Hussein sought to veto the

participation of American officials—later revealed to be CIA and Pentagon spies—in UN weapons inspections, Washington declared that Iraq could not be allowed to dictate to the UN. No such objections have been made to the Israeli effort to control the composition of the panel investigating the Jenin atrocities.

Finally, the Israelis attacked the terms of reference for the investigation laid out by Kofi Annan, insisting that it should engage solely in "fact-finding" and should come to no conclusions. The Sharon government also demanded that any testimony and evidence collected should be the exclusive property of the UN commission, and not be turned over to any other authority.

Behind this legalistic quibbling is a real concern: that the UN investigation could lay the basis for indicting Sharon and other Israeli officials for violations of the Geneva Conventions. Cabinet spokesman Gideon Meir called the probe "a setup to accuse Israel of war crimes."

US officials claimed to be urging Sharon and his cabinet to cooperate with the UN inquiry. "That was our resolution," a State Department spokesman told the press. "We believe it should be implemented." Secretary of State Colin Powell telephoned Sharon and discussed the Israeli decision to delay or even shut down the probe.

The dispute between the Bush administration and Sharon over the UN investigation appears to be following the same pattern as the public divergence over Bush's call for an "immediate" withdrawal of Israeli military forces from the West Bank, with the US government saying one thing for the record, mainly for European and Arab consumption, while privately giving the Israelis a green light to continue their hard-line policy.

Senior officials of Amnesty International, the Red Cross, and other humanitarian aid groups have already begun to assemble evidence of human rights violations in Jenin and elsewhere on the West Bank to present to the UN commission.

Rene Kosirnik, regional chairman of the Red Cross, told a press conference that the Israeli Defense Forces violated international norms both in the physical destruction inflicted on the Jenin camp and by preventing Red Cross rescue teams and other aid workers from getting into the camp for nearly a week. Undoubtedly many of those who were wounded and died in the conflict could have been saved by prompt medical intervention.

Putting the case mildly, Kosirnik said, "When we are confronted with the extent of destruction in the Jenin refugee camp, in an area

of civilian concentration, it is difficult to accept that international humanitarian law has been fully respected.”

At a news conference in London, Amnesty International charged Israel with “very serious violations of human rights” in Jenin. The group called for a fuller investigation to determine if Israel was guilty of war crimes, including summary executions, failure to protect civilians, use of excessive force, use of civilians as human shields, and deliberate and wanton destruction of property.

Amnesty said the complaints from Palestinian witnesses suggested a systematic pattern of abuse, rather than isolated cases of indiscipline by Israeli soldiers. There was no effort to give the 13,000 people in the refugee camp an opportunity to escape before the military onslaught began. Instead, the entire population was treated as the enemy.

A forensic pathologist who traveled to Jenin on behalf of Amnesty, Derrick Pounder of Dundee University, Scotland, said the most disturbing finding was the absence of severely wounded patients in the local hospital, despite the fact that there is typically a ratio of three wounded for every death in a combat situation. Given the 40 Palestinians the IDF claims were killed in Jenin, there should be well over a hundred wounded. “We draw the conclusion that they were allowed to die where they were,” Pounder said.

The number killed at Jenin has been impossible to determine because of the enormous scale of the devastation and Israeli restrictions on access to the camp. Initially the IDF estimated the number of dead at 200, and proposed to remove the bodies in refrigerated trucks to a common mass grave in the Jordan Valley. After an Israeli Supreme Court order blocking that action, the number of bodies was suddenly discovered to be only “dozens,” and these were mainly shattered pieces that had to be dug out of the ruins by hand.

Palestinians have charged that many bodies have been burned or otherwise disposed of by the Israeli military, and that dozens if not hundreds of remains are still buried in the wreckage. The circumstantial evidence supports these claims. Aid agencies have found that 600 homes in Jenin have been destroyed and another 200 made uninhabitable. Given the density of the population, these homes must have sheltered many thousands before Israeli tanks, helicopter gunships, armored cars and bulldozers moved in.

Even after the withdrawal of IDF troops from the camp, Israel continues to block rescue and salvage efforts. The Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* reported that a team of 34 Greek earthquake rescue experts was sitting on a runway at the Athens airport, in a plane loaded with equipment, because the Israeli Foreign Ministry told the Greek government “there is no need for such a team,” and denied permission to enter the West Bank.

Press accounts in the aftermath of the withdrawal of Israeli troops from most of the West Bank’s towns and cities have made clear that the events in Jenin were only the most terrible in a rampage that took place throughout the occupied territory.

In Nablus, soldiers stole computer equipment, vandalized stores and broke open safes. They demanded money and jewels in the homes they invaded, destroyed family photographs and smashed furniture. They daubed anti-Arab slogans on the walls of buildings. Three mosques, a Roman Catholic Church and the 400-year-old

Turkish baths were heavily damaged. Israeli soldiers killed 75 Palestinians, the largest admitted death toll of any of the cities invaded.

In Ramallah, Israeli tanks smashed buildings, roads, parked cars and street lights. Israeli soldiers broke into dozens of stores and looted them, and defaced monuments in the central square. A dress shop owner told the *Washington Post* that troops took over his home and stole a mobile phone, cash equivalent to about \$200, some antiques and his son’s GameBoy.

At one bank, reporters saw an ATM machine that had been yanked out of the wall, while tellers’ drawers were pried open and holes were drilled into the vault. Computers and telephone equipment were deliberately smashed, and the soldiers taped a large Star of David and the number of their unit onto the front entrance.

The offices of nearly every ministry of the Palestinian Authority were laid waste. In the Education Ministry, Israeli soldiers removed the hard drives of every computer, seizing test records for students, payroll time sheets, and construction contracts for the building of schools. They also blew open safes and removed cash, documents and official seals. Acting education minister Naim Abu Hommos told the *New York Times*, “The only conclusion I can make is they don’t want to see any Palestinian institution able to work again.”

The *Los Angeles Times* gave a detailed account of the destruction in dozens of Palestinian government offices with functions ranging from education to health care to public works, with partial estimates placing losses as high as \$450 million:

“In ministry after ministry, computers, photocopiers and other electronic machines were heaped in piles, destroyed by explosions and fire. Important files were missing. Telephones were smashed. Pictures were ripped from the walls.”

In the Ministry of Public Works, the destruction included outright vandalism with no conceivable military purpose: “Couches and chairs were slashed, the stuffing spilling out. A map of the region had the West Bank torn out. Even the minister’s personal toilet was shattered.”

This kind of thievery, vandalism, individual violence and destruction expresses, not the stress of combat, but an intense hatred directed against an entire people or race.

In that sense, the devastation of the West Bank over the past month recalls the conduct of American forces in Vietnam, or even that of the German Nazis on the eastern front in World War II, who viewed the invasion of the Soviet Union as a war of extermination against the Russian and other Slavic peoples. The American Jewish peace activist, Adam Shapiro, compared Ramallah and Nablus to German cities after Kristallnacht, the 1938 rampage of anti-Semitic violence instigated by Hitler.



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