

Powell ends Mideast trip: a US cover for Israeli war crimes

Patrick Martin
18 April 2002

US Secretary of State Colin Powell ended his week-long visit to the Middle East and returned to Washington Wednesday with Israel firmly entrenched in its military occupation of nearly every major Palestinian city and town on the West Bank. Israeli military forces have killed hundreds of Palestinians since the invasion began March 29. They have destroyed homes, water and electricity systems, and the infrastructure that sustains other public services.

While Powell's trip had the ostensible purpose of reasserting the US role as a mediator in the Mideast conflict, his performance was anything but even-handed. He placed no demands on Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to halt the indiscriminate killing and destruction on the West Bank.

President Bush's April 6 declaration that Israel must pull its troops out "immediately" was downgraded to a mere "request" by the time Powell arrived in Jerusalem April 11. When Powell left, six days later, the US representative claimed to be satisfied with a vague promise from Sharon that military operations in most West Bank towns would be concluded in "a week or so." Even this promise excluded Ramallah, where Yasser Arafat and his immediate entourage remain under siege, and Bethlehem, where 250 Palestinians, including the town's governor and much of its police force, are inside the Church of the Nativity surrounded by Israeli troops.

Instead of pressuring Sharon, Powell spent the bulk of his efforts extracting statements from Arafat pledging the Palestinian Authority—which has been virtually shattered by the Israeli invasion—to conduct a crackdown on suicide bombings. This insistence on a Palestinian pledge of non-violence comes under conditions where more Palestinians have been killed in the two-week Israeli invasion than all the victims of suicide bombings in the past two years.

Arafat himself protested the conditions of his final meeting with Powell, held in the portion of his Ramallah compound still controlled by the Palestinian Authority, but with water, electricity and other supplies dictated by his Israeli captors. He said bitterly, "I have to ask the whole international world, I have to ask his excellency President Bush, I have to

ask the United Nations, is this acceptable that I cannot go outside from this door? Do you think this will not reflect on the whole stability and peace in the Middle East?"

Palestinian Authority Information Minister Yassir Abed Rabbo said, "The meeting was a catastrophe. It ended with no concrete result. There is no intention to stage an Israeli withdrawal. Powell transmitted to the Palestinian side false promises about a withdrawal." Chief peace negotiator Saeb Erekat said, "Secretary Powell leaves the situation much worse than when he came."

During his pre-departure press conference Powell was asked why he did not go to Jenin, the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting. He claimed that he did not have time to view the city where as many as 500 Palestinians have been killed in the past two weeks. But he found time to view the damage of a Jerusalem suicide bombing in which six Israelis were killed, as well as to travel to Lebanon and Syria, at the urging of Sharon, to pressure those countries to curb the activities of the Islamic fundamentalist militia group Hezbollah.

The Bush administration has barely disguised the cynicism of its diplomatic intervention. Bush himself has had no contact with the press throughout Powell's trip, contrary to his normal practice, in order to avoid any questions about Sharon's alleged "defiance" of the US demand for a pullout from the West Bank.

White House press spokesman Ari Fleischer, in remarks that were widely noted in the American press and by Democratic and Republican politicians, distinguished between Bush's position and that of his secretary of state, saying that Powell "has gone with maximum flexibility from the president to use his discretion to do what can be done to achieve peace."

While Powell was meeting with Arafat, the Bush administration dispatched its leading war hawk, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, to address a pro-Israel rally in Washington where speaker after speaker denounced the US call for an Israeli withdrawal and equated Arafat with Osama bin Laden.

Conditions in the Palestinian refugee camp outside the city of Jenin demonstrate the real purpose of the Israeli invasion. The camp was the site of the fiercest Palestinian resistance to the Israeli Defense Forces—of the 27 IDF soldiers killed in West Bank fighting, 23 died in Jenin. The toll on the Palestinian side was much higher—at least 100, according to the Israelis, as many as 500 according to Palestinian survivors, who called the Israeli attack a “massacre.”

The IDF has provided only limited access to Jenin for journalists and humanitarian aid workers, and a definitive death toll has not yet been established, although there is evidence of Palestinian families being buried alive as their homes were hit by Israeli bulldozers and armored cars. But Israeli censorship cannot conceal the scale of the devastation.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported Monday, “Nearly two weeks after the Israeli army launched the bloodiest battle in the West Bank since the 1967 Middle East War, there is growing testimony that its victory at the Jenin refugee camp was marred by human rights violations. Israeli soldiers shot unarmed civilians, bulldozed people alive and blocked access to medical care, according to more than a dozen witnesses who spoke Sunday in a temporary shelter just outside the smoldering camp.”

The *Washington Post* reported Tuesday, “The heart of this battered Palestinian shantytown of 13,000 has been erased from the face of the earth, its maze of apartment houses and twisting streets bulldozed by the Israeli military into a vast crater of broken concrete.” The two-square-block crater in the middle of the camp resembles nothing so much as “Ground Zero” at the World Trade Center in New York City—yet it is the Palestinians, not the Israelis, whom the American media demonizes as “terrorists.”

Rene Kosirnik, head of the Red Cross delegation in Israel, said the IDF was subjecting the Palestinian people to “collective punishment”—a charge that the Israeli military is guilty of war crimes. “The whole population should not suffer so much,” he told reporters after a meeting with Colin Powell.

Throughout the West Bank, Israeli troops have smashed up government offices of the Palestinian Authority, destroying computer hard drives, burning papers, ransacking filing cabinets and seizing office and technical equipment. Press accounts have noted such actions at the Education Ministry, the Ministry of Finance, the Land Registry, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Central Bureau of Statistics, municipal buildings and libraries.

Payroll records, university records, even test results and report cards for elementary school students have been destroyed. Minister of Information Rabbo said, “What they are doing, and what is not being noticed enough, is that they

are destroying all the records, all the archives, all the files, of the Palestinian Authority. This is an administrative massacre, and this will lead to chaos.”

The destruction goes beyond wanton violence and has a definite political significance. The Sharon government seeks to eliminate the embryonic emergence of a Palestinian state and make the West Bank uninhabitable for the Palestinian population. The aim is to create the conditions where a large proportion of this population will be forced to emigrate, to be replaced by further Zionist colonization of formerly Arab territories.

The Sharon government is guilty of a form of ethnic cleansing—the use of violence, intimidation and deprivation to shift the ethnic balance on the West Bank and pave the way for annexation of part or all of the region by Israel.

As the *Washington Post* noted April 14, in one of the few references to this subject in the American press: “the recent wave of suicide bombings has rekindled among Israelis a search for drastic solutions. On the right, there is new support for ‘transfer,’ a euphemism for the forced expulsion of Palestinians from the West Bank to Jordan or other parts of the Arab World.”

The next stage of this process is the permanent military occupation of “buffer zones” on the West Bank. The Israeli cabinet gave the go-ahead April 14 for the first three zones, near Jerusalem and between the West Bank city of Tulkarm and the Israeli town of Umm al Fahm.

The American media has repeatedly claimed that most of the 5,000 Palestinians arrested in the past two weeks have been released after questioning. Israeli sources now contradict these claims, suggesting that as many as 4,000 of those detained are still in custody. Sharon has ordered the reopening of Ketziot, the detention center in the southern Negev desert that became notorious for the barbaric conditions in which Palestinian prisoners were held.

Particularly ominous is the arrest of Marwan Barghouti, the secretary of Arafat’s Fatah party on the West Bank. Even the Israeli press concedes that Barghouti is a political leader rather than the commander of a military organization or terrorist network. Yet he has been jailed in Jerusalem and Sharon is demanding his prosecution for “horrendous acts of murder of hundreds of Israelis.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact