

# UN pronounces on Jenin: Forget about it

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The United Nations' decision to call off its mission to investigate allegations of Israeli war crimes in the Palestinian refugee camp at Jenin is proof, if proof were needed, that the body is little more than a pliant tool of imperialist policy.

Above all it demonstrates the UN's willingness to roll over at the behest of Uncle Sam. For the decision to abandon the Jenin inquiry was taken in Washington days before UN Secretary General Kofi Annan proposed the action to the body's Security Council on May 1.

In a letter to the UN body, Annan said he intended to tell the 20-member team, led by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, to quit Geneva where it has been waiting for the Israeli government to allow it to enter the Occupied Territories.

Israel initially claimed it had nothing to hide and welcomed a UN mission, but this was soon revealed as a pathetic ruse. Ever since the mission was announced, the Likud-Labour coalition government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has made a series of ever-more outrageous demands regarding the composition and remit of any UN mission. By the end, Israel had specified six conditions that would have utterly compromised any investigation. Sharon demanded that the investigating team include anti-terrorism experts who would examine what took place from a military standpoint, that any investigation would not produce findings that may be used to prosecute Israeli soldiers for war crimes, that Israel would determine which documents the team would be allowed to look at, and which witnesses it would be permitted to question, and that it would be limited to fact finding and would produce no general conclusions or recommendations.

The Sharon government did not even deign to reply to a series of letters from Annan and other top UN personnel. In contrast, Annan spent days bending over backwards to accommodate Israel. Military personnel were included in the proposed team, as requested. Annan then sent a personal letter to the Sharon government on April 28, in which he summarised the results of his extended negotiations with Israeli officials. He assured the Israelis that their soldiers and others interviewed by the fact-finding team would be guaranteed anonymity, and that there would be no transcripts that might be used in war crimes prosecutions. But he said he could not agree to remove any of his appointees and assign new leaders, or accede to Israel's demand that the mission's report make no observations or conclusions.

Still the Israeli government announced that it wouldn't cooperate with the inquiry. On April 30, Sharon's security cabinet voted against letting the investigation proceed unless all six of its conditions were met.

Annan responded by announcing that he was in favour of disbanding the fact-finding team. He wrote to the Security Council, "in these circumstances, I cannot leave these gentlemen and women sitting in Geneva." In Annan's terse epistle, he felt no need to justify his decision to any of the Palestinians who have lost loved-ones during

Israel's incursion and were promised by the UN that their story would at least be heard.

There can be few climb-downs in history so publicly humiliating. After all the decision to investigate events at Jenin was taken by the UN Security Council after an unprecedented 15-0 vote, with the US backing an investigation of Israel for the first time since the present conflict began.

But the move caused barely a ripple within the Security Council. US ambassador to the UN, John D. Negroponte, said that even though the State Department had said that it wanted Israel and the UN to resolve the impasse, "obviously, when the secretary-general makes his decision, we will fully respect that."

Neither was there any condemnation made of Israel. America is threatening to go to war against Iraq because the government of Saddam Hussein has refused to allow in its weapons inspectors. Then the UN is held up as an authoritative body that cannot be disrespected without courting disaster. Yet Israel does not even receive a mild rebuke for, in effect, telling the UN to get lost.

Negroponte's statement of polite resignation was for public consumption only. Behind the scenes the US was instrumental in ensuring that the UN investigation was called off, and instructed Annan to do so. The US offered to wind up the investigation as part of a quid-pro-quo agreement whereby Sharon would end the siege of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Ramallah headquarters. The other major player in the shabby affair was Saudi Arabia, as the leading representative of all the Arab regimes.

The US originally sponsored the Security Council resolution endorsing the Jenin investigation, but only in order to facilitate efforts by its Arab allies to stem a growing tide of anger amongst the Arab masses. Just what the Arab regimes were confronting is illustrated in an article by Thomas L. Friedman in the May 1 *New York Times*.

He complains that an, "explosion of Arab satellite TV stations and Web sites has had a profound impact on Arab public opinion by showing live, non-stop images of the Israeli crackdown on Palestinians in the West Bank. These TV and e-mail images have fueled massive demonstrations across the Arab world, and in Egypt and Bahrain protesters have been shot." He speaks of "independent Arab satellite TV stations, which compete for audiences by showing the most gruesome, one-sided images of Israel brutalizing Palestinians."

Above all this has made things exceedingly difficult for the Arab rulers, Friedman adds: "When I covered the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, it took hours or days for film footage to get out, and Arab regimes could tightly control what was shown." Now, however, Friedman cites a Jordanian editor observing, "You hear the screams... It comes right into your bedroom. You go to bed seeing Palestinians killed and you wake up seeing them killed... If you put anything else on the front page other than this, people will laugh at you."

The US was forced to go through the motions of seeking an independent investigation into Jenin, while behind the scenes it engaged in bi-polar diplomatic discussions with Saudi Arabia on one side and Israel on the other. Most of last week was taken up with private discussions between Bush and Crown Prince Abdullah. By the weekend, the US had brokered a proposed accord with Saudi backing, whereby Sharon would allow Arafat to go free, in return for the UN investigation being called off and the handing over to US custody of six Palestinians sought by Israel.

Getting Jenin off the political agenda and freeing Arafat from house arrest was considered essential in order to pave the way for an agreement that secured US interests in the Middle East. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was threatening to ignite an explosion of Arab anger and derail US plans for a resumption of military hostilities against Iraq.

Sharon was naturally anxious to end any possibility of an inquiry into Jenin. Despite its best efforts at concealment and the willingness of a supportive media to proclaim that a massacre had not taken place, evidence of war crimes committed by Israel was growing. Of over 50 bodies so far recovered, nearly half were civilians and included women, children and cripples.

It must be said that none of the major human rights organisations have emerged from the Jenin events with their reputations unscathed. All have been ready to make statements that no massacre had taken place at Jenin before any investigation had taken place. They did so in the full knowledge that Israel had denied all access to the site of its crimes for days and, most significantly, by insisting that the statements of hundreds of Palestinian eye-witnesses who insisted that a massacre had occurred should be dismissed. The contrast between this approach and the stand taken by the human rights groups when ethnic Albanians charged Serbian forces with having committed atrocities could not be more stark. Then the general rule to which they adhered was to uncritically recount every allegation made against the Milosevic government and to demand immediate military intervention by the Western powers.

Nevertheless, despite the dual standards of proof employed, the initial investigations of the human rights groups did point to war crimes having been committed by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF).

Amnesty International said its delegates had “found credible evidence of grave breaches of international humanitarian law and violations of human rights during the IDF incursion into the camp between 3 and 17 April.” They cited Israel’s refusal to allow civilians to leave the area, preventing medical personnel from entering the camp to administer to the injured or dying, leaving the dead and wounded in houses and on the streets and deliberately destroying homes “after Palestinian armed groups had surrendered and ceased resistance.”

Human Rights Watch (HRW) investigator Peter Bouckaert noted, “several people died of their wounds without receiving any medical treatment” and “One nurse was shot and killed by Israeli soldiers during the military offensive when she was trying to help a wounded civilian.” HRW documented 140 homes in the camp that were completely destroyed and more than 200 others severely damaged, leaving an estimated 4,000 people, more than a quarter of the population of the camp, homeless. Bouckaert listed four areas of concern: significant number of civilians who were killed in circumstances directly related to the forceful methods used by Israel during its offensive; the massive destruction of civilian homes and sometimes indiscriminate use of helicopter fire used in the camp; the

use of Palestinian civilians by the Israeli army to carry out some of its most dangerous tasks in the camp; the blanket denial of medical and humanitarian access to the camp during and after the military operation.

A promise to make the threatened probe into Jenin disappear was, therefore, an attractive proposition for Sharon. So Bush and his National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice offered it as part of the package of measures formulated together with Saudi Arabia. During an Israeli cabinet meeting to discuss whether to lift the siege on Arafat, Sharon is quoted as saying, “We have to do this because Bush has offered help with the Jenin fact-finding team affair.” This fact helped Sharon secure a 17-to-9 vote in favour of doing so.

Justice for the victims of Israel’s brutal invasion of Jenin was bargained away as part of the sordid political manoeuvres between the US, the UN, Israel and the Arab regimes. As if this was not bad enough, Jenin was a sweetener for proposals that will only worsen the desperate plight of the Palestinians.

Part of the agreement on ending the siege is for US and British monitors to oversee the imprisonment of the six Palestinian militants in the town of Jericho—four of whom a Palestinian court convicted of assassinating right-wing Israeli Cabinet Minister Rehavam Zeevi, as well as Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine leader Ahmed Saadat and Fuad Shubaki, who Israel claims is an arms smuggler. Sharon had demanded their extradition to Israel, but the alternative arrangement paves the way for a far more extensive role in Palestinian affairs on the part of US imperialism.

Saudi Arabia has promised Bush to place maximum pressure on Arafat to accept an unprecedented level of direct US supervision over every aspect of the internal life of what remains of the Palestinian Authority. This is to ensure the full cooperation of his security forces with Israeli and Western intelligence in cracking down on resistance to Israel.

It is this anti-Palestinian agenda that prompted Israeli Transportation Minister Ephraim Sneh to ask, “How can we turn down an offer from the Americans? The battle is now moving to the diplomatic arena, and in this arena our greatest asset is US support.”

For his part, Arafat has shown great personal courage while surrounded by an Israeli army that could have taken the decision to have him killed at any time. But he has no perspective for opposing the machinations of US imperialism with Israel to maintain the denial of the social and democratic rights of his people.

The Palestinian leader will be placed under enormous pressure to do America’s bidding. Despite being freed from his headquarters, he is still hostage to Israel and its US backers. Much of the West Bank and Gaza Strip is in ruins, while Israel’s military aggression continues in various Palestinian towns. As Arafat emerged, his first act was to issue a statement denouncing the Israeli army as terrorists, Nazis and racists for attacking and setting light to the Church of the Nativity. Other provocations will follow. Meanwhile Sharon has warned that, if Arafat leaves the West Bank, he may never be allowed back. “We are reserving the right to keep him out,” he said.



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