

Sharon's latest war crime: Gaza missile attack kills 15

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24 July 2002

At least 15 people, including nine children, were slaughtered by an Israeli missile attack on a residential building in Gaza on the morning of July 23. The military head of Hamas, Sheikh Salah Shahada, was the target of this attack.

The dead children were reported to be aged between two months and 13 years.

An estimated 145 people were injured in Israel's latest war crime, a dramatic extension of its established policy of political assassinations that show complete disregard for the safety of innocent men, women and children. Still more people could be buried under the rubble.

Another seven Palestinians have been killed in Israeli operations in the previous two days.

Anger welled up at the attack and there were clashes between Palestinians and Israeli soldiers on duty near the Gush Katif Zionist settlement during which two Palestinians were injured.

A group representing 13 Palestinian nationalist and Islamic factions called for a mass demonstration against Israel at a collective funeral for the 15. The call met a response from thousands of Palestinians, some carrying rifles.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, dismissed criticism of the attack, describing it as a "great success", while Foreign Ministry spokesman Gideon Meir said, "What we are doing is self-defence." One government spokesman even claimed that Shahada was planning a terrorist atrocity that could lead to "thousands of dead".

Prior to the outrage, there were clear indications that Hamas was in fact discussing calling off its campaign of suicide bombings in the event of an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The previous day, Monday July 22, the spiritual

leader and founder of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, had said his organisation would consider halting suicide attacks on Israelis if Israel withdrew from West Bank cities and "stop your aggression, demolishing homes. Release prisoners and stop assassinations. Once the occupation and all those measures against our people stop, we are ready to totally study stopping martyrdom operations, in a positive way."

Now, Hamas has warned of revenge attacks.

The Palestinian Authority accused Israel of trying to sabotage international efforts to secure a withdrawal of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) from Palestinian territories. Earlier the Israeli liberal newspaper *Haaretz* had reported a security plan proposed by Palestinian Interior Minister Abdel Razek Yehiyeh to Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres promising to end terrorist attacks after a full withdrawal from all seven towns and cities to the lines Israel occupied before the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada.

Once again Sharon has responded to Palestinian overtures with a violent provocation. It is by no means the first in recent days.

In Nablus last Friday July 19, Israeli security forces arrested 21 relatives of two militants whom Israel accuses of having organised suicide bombings and announced that it would expel them from the West Bank and deport them to the Gaza Strip, which is now enclosed behind an electrified fence and serves as a virtual prison for more than one million Palestinians. No charges have been brought against any of the 21 detainees.

The Israeli authorities have accused Hamas member, Nasser al-Din, of organising the July 16 attack on the bus at Emmanuel settlement that killed nine people, and Ali Ahmad al-Ajouri, a militant from a Fatah organisation, the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade, of

organising the July 17 double suicide bombing in Tel Aviv that killed three people. The two wanted men are believed to be in hiding.

The Israeli armed forces also demolished the homes of the two suspects, which they justified on “security grounds”, leaving dozens of people homeless with neighbouring houses suffering extensive damage.

According to the B’Tselem human rights group, Israel deported 1,522 Palestinians between 1967 and 1992 when the measure was halted. This is the first time, however, that it has attempted to deport suspected terrorists’ families who had no connection with their relatives’ activities.

The move met with worldwide condemnation of Israel, including United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan and even from United States State Department spokesman, Richard Boucher. But Labour’s Shimon Peres lent his support to the plan, which he justified as a way of denying bombers a “supportive environment”.

Both Hamas and Islamic Jihad threatened retaliation with a new wave of suicide bombings “everywhere in Israel” if Sharon went ahead with the deportations.

In the face of this backlash, Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein said the government could only deport the relatives of terrorists or their commanders if it could demonstrate a link between the detainees and the terrorist attacks. That was as far as the legal system was prepared to go. It seems likely that the Attorney General’s fig leaf will allow Sharon to deport some of the 21 detainees arrested July 19, based upon ‘evidence’ derived from questioning of the detainees by Shin Bet (Israel’s security forces) after giving them only 12 hours notice.

On the very same day as his government supposedly climbed down at the Attorney General’s request, Sharon ordered the police to immediately begin deporting 50,000 illegal foreign workers, including Palestinians and Jordanians over the next 12 months. A special force of 150-200 policemen will be established and later integrated into the “migration authority” being set up by the Interior Ministry and charged with deporting 100,000 illegal foreign workers by 2005.

Israel justifies every atrocity it commits as either retaliation for suicide bombings, or a measure to prevent them in its own “war against terrorism”. Writing in the July 22 *Washington Post*, Jackson Diehl made the correct observation that the suicide bombings

are a political godsend to Sharon’s government in that they “have managed to cloak and protect” Sharon’s latest burst of Jewish settlement construction in the West Bank and Gaza. He notes that since Sharon took office less than 18 months ago, 44 new settlement sites, including more than 300 units, have been established in the West Bank, including nine in the past three months. The government’s budget calls for \$64 million in subsidies this year to induce Israelis to move to settlements, plus \$19 million in funding for settlement development. Nine roads are being built for use by the settlements, at a cost of \$50 million. Tenders have been submitted for the construction of 957 new units in the settlements.

It is this broader perspective of eliminating any possibility of a Palestinian state, however small, discontiguous and truncated, being established that dictates Sharon’s policy of constant provocations and war crimes. Whenever there is the faintest possibility of negotiations to calm the situation, the IDF is instructed to carry out some incendiary measure or other aimed at turning up the heat once more.



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