

Israel targets civilians and UN personnel with impunity

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Israel has unleashed a wave of attacks in densely populated areas in the West Bank and Gaza, killing and wounding Palestinian civilians and United Nations personnel.

As far as Ariel Sharon's government is concerned, civilians and UN personnel are no longer simply "collateral damage" but legitimate targets. But the world's leaders have stood by and simply wrung their hands as Sharon has intensified his war of terror.

The Israeli army has stepped up its raids into the impoverished and squalid Gaza strip refugee camps in recent months in an effort to kill militants it believes are leaders of anti-Israel resistance. The attacks are becoming an almost daily occurrence.

On December 8, Israeli forces demolished a two-story Palestinian house near the Jewish settlement of Netzarim in Gaza.

On December 4, Israeli security forces carried out a "targeted assassination". Helicopter gunships fired three missiles in Gaza City, killing Mustafa Saba, whom Israel claimed was responsible for the deaths of seven Israeli soldiers earlier in the year.

The following day, Israeli armed forces opened fire on Palestinians near the Zionist settlement of Rafiah Yam, killing a 40-year-old woman, Nahla Aqel, and injuring her four-year-old son and fourteen-year-old daughter, both of whom are believed to be in a very critical condition. Her seven-year-old son was also wounded. A second woman was shot in the head. Eyewitnesses said they were walking in the middle of the street.

Later that night, during Eid el-Fitr, the celebrations to mark the end of the fast of Ramadan, Israeli troops used 25 tanks, armoured personnel carriers and helicopters gunships in a pre-dawn raid on the Bureij refugee camp in the Gaza Strip, killing 10 people, including two

employees of a UN humanitarian agency.

The missiles destroyed the home of Aiman Shasniyah, the target of the attack, but he escaped unharmed. The Israeli authorities claimed that most of the victims were fighters, but Hamas, the militant Palestinian group, denied this, saying that only two of the victims were members of its military wing, and four were supporters.

Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian leader, said, "It is a new massacre. What happened is a continuation of the massacres against the Palestinian people."

Israel justified the carnage with the claim that five of the dead were members of the militant group Hamas. "We encountered a lot of resistance and the forces fired at armed gunmen," said Brigadier Yisrael Ziv, commander of security forces in Gaza.

Palestinian sources flatly contradicted the Brigadier's claim, saying that at least seven of the nine killed were civilians. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) said that the victims included two of its own personnel—a teacher and school attendant. The school teacher, 32-year-old Ahlam Riziq Kandil, was killed in her home. Osama Hassan Tahrawi, the 31-year-old school attendant, was killed along with six friends and relatives when a rocket fired from a helicopter hit him as he stood in his backyard.

This brings to five the number of UN staff killed this year and three in as many weeks. On November 22, an Israeli soldier shot 54-year-old Iain Hook in the back from a rooftop some 25 metres away, using a telescopic sight. Hook, a British UN official, was leading a UN project to rebuild the Jenin refugee camp, parts of which were destroyed last April by the Israeli army. Security forces then prevented an ambulance reaching the compound for 25 minutes. As a result, Hook bled to death before the ambulance reached the hospital.

At first, the Israelis tried to say that he had been shot outside the compound while standing among Palestinians. When that story became untenable, they changed their line and said that they had mistaken him for one of the Palestinian gunmen. The UN dismissed their claim, saying that it was “totally incredible” since its staff had said that there were no gunmen in the area and if there had been, some of the Palestinian gunmen who were supposedly around him would also have been shot. Indeed, there was no evidence of any gun battle before Hook’s death.

The incident points to Israel’s barely concealed stand that since the UN collaborates with Palestinians, it has now become a legitimate target.

Criticism from Western leaders has been muted. They confined their remarks to perfunctory noises about the loss of life, but did not demand that any action be taken against such flagrant breaches of international law. Javier Solana, the European Union commissioner for foreign affairs, said that an operation in such a densely populated area could “only lead to the loss of innocent lives. I extend my condolences to the families of the victims, who were celebrating the end of Ramadan and who are now in mourning”.

The Danish foreign minister, Per Stig Moeller, warned Israel on behalf of the European Union that using “excessive might” could backfire. “It’s deeply tragic that completely innocent people again have been killed,” Moeller said. “It creates a new fundament for more terrorism. It creates anger,” he continued.

The most pusillanimous response came from Kofi Annan, the UN secretary-general. Despite the loss of two of his own staff, he did not speak out against the attack on the Bureij refugee camp in person.

Instead, Fred Eckhard, his spokesman, read out a statement urging Israel to show restraint. Annan was, he said, “gravely concerned” by the raid on the refugee camp. “The secretary-general deplores the loss of innocent civilian life. He has repeatedly urged Israel to refrain from excessive and disproportionate use of deadly force in civilian areas. He wishes to remind the government of Israel of its obligations as an occupying power to protect the civilian population, and urges them to ensure that the Israeli Defence Forces behave with greater restraint and discipline and in conformity with international humanitarian law”, he continued.

The Bush administration issued a mild rebuke to

Israel for killing Palestinian civilians and demolishing Palestinian homes, but insisted that Israel had a right to defend itself. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher simply repeated the standard US criticism of Israeli conduct. “We have made it quite clear... that the Israelis need to be aware of the consequences of their own actions. We have indeed been quite open about our concerns about the Israeli activities, particularly the civilian casualties that have resulted from many of the Israeli actions. We’ve seen a number of people hurt and killed, old people, young people as well. We’ve made our concerns clear about demolitions of houses, for example.”

With the support of the Bush presidency, Sharon has torn up the 1993 Oslo Accord that sought to secure a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. He has consolidated Israel’s control of the most valuable and fertile parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

As far as Sharon is concerned, Israel’s war against the Palestinians is an integral part of the US “war against terrorism”, which gives him a carte blanche to continue and escalate these policies. The Bush administration’s open contempt for the UN and its increasing disdain for its European allies have only served to strengthen his resolve. If Sharon cannot expel the Palestinians en masse via the so-called transfer policy, he will round them up into tiny fortified ghettos, and he will brook no interference from anyone who gets in his way—civilians or even UN staff and officials. He is determined to create “the facts on the ground” that will ensure he does not have to pay the US “bill for peace” in the form of a new Oslo accord in the aftermath of the war on Iraq, as it did after the 1991 Gulf War.



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