

British activist in critical condition after being shot by Israeli military

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British peace activist Tom Hurndall is the third member of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) to be severely wounded or killed by the Israeli Defence Forces. He is in a critical condition in a hospital in southern Israel, after being shot in the head by an Israel sniper in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah.

Tom, 22, from Tufnell Park, London, was studying photography at Manchester University. He arrived in the West Bank on April 4 and was acting as a human shield as part of the ISM's efforts to oppose the Israeli occupation of Palestine towns and cities on the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

On April 11, he was in the Rafah refugee camp with eight other members of the ISM, when snipers opened fire from a tower to the east. Tom had seen a child who was in danger, which he retrieved from an exposed position before again leaving a protected area to escort two other children to safety. It was at this point that he was shot in the head.

There is no question that the shooting was deliberate. It was broad daylight and Tom was wearing a bright orange jacket with reflective strips to identify himself. No Palestinians were firing in the area. The tower from where the sniper fire came was just 100 metres away.

Hurndall was declared brain dead after arriving at Rafah Hospital. An eyewitness and British ISM colleague Rafael Cohen was standing 15 metres away when the shooting occurred. Israeli troops were firing over the heads of a group of children playing on a mound of earth and Tom had gone to pull them to safety. "He was trying to pull two girls out of danger when he was hit in the head by a bullet," said Cohen.

"At first they were firing several metres over the children's heads but it was getting very, very dangerous so Tom went to help them. He was at ground level when they shot him directly in the head."

The IDF denied any knowledge of the shooting, despite

admitting troops "offered medical assistance and airlifted [Tom] to a hospital in Beersheva". The only shooting incident of which they claimed to be aware in Rafah was when "a Palestinian gunman dressed in combat uniform opened fire on an army watchtower" in the refugee camp. The IDF claimed the Palestinian's body had been returned to the Palestinian authorities, but security sources said that no body had been returned.

The shooting is part of a pattern of attacks on the ISM, aimed at forcing them to leave the Occupied Territories and allow the IDF to proceed with its murder and repression of the Palestinians unhindered and unobserved.

In recent weeks the IDF has conducted mass arrests, killed dozens of Palestinians and carried out two assassinations (known euphemistically as "targeted killings") of Palestinian militants.

It is against this background that Tom's shooting must be placed. It was the third time in the past four weeks that an ISM activist has been injured or killed during Israeli military operations.

On March 16, American citizen Rachel Corrie, 23, was crushed to death by the blade of an Israeli army bulldozer in Rafah while protecting the home of a Palestinian family. She also was clearly seen and recognised as an international peace activist.

On April 5, Brian Avery, 24, of Albuquerque, New Mexico, was shot in the face by an Israeli armoured personnel carrier from 50 metres distance while attempting to protect Palestinian children in Jenin. He also was clearly identified as an international peace activist, but this did not prevent a soldier firing a round of high-speed bullets directly to his head.

The IDF had imposed a second day of curfew in Jenin. At about 6:30 p.m. Brian and another ISM activist, Danish citizen Lasse Schmidt, 35, were at the ISM's Jenin headquarters when they heard the sound of gunfire coming from about two blocks away. They left to

investigate and had traveled about a hundred metres when they saw two armoured personnel carriers advancing towards them at low speed. There were no Palestinians on the streets in the area, armed or otherwise.

Both ISM activists stood still and raised their hands above their heads, but when the first armoured personnel carrier was 50 metres away it fired a burst of machine gun fire at the ground in front of them so that they were sprayed by a shower of broken bullets and stones. Lasse Schmidt was hit in the leg by shrapnel. Brian, who was wearing a fluorescent red vest with a reflective white cross on its back and front, was hit in the face and had his left cheek almost totally shot off.

A month earlier, on February 14, seven ISM volunteers (three American, three British and one Dutch) had come under Israeli fire when they approached bulldozers. Last November Irish activist Ciaomhe Butterly, 23, was shot in the leg in Jenin after talking to soldiers, and was subsequently deported.

Rachel Corrie's death was a blatant act of murder. Eyewitness accounts and photographic evidence make clear that she was clearly visible, kneeling 20 metres in front of the bulldozer on flat ground and wearing bright red clothing to identify her.

But an Israeli army investigation into her death concluded that its forces were not to blame and even accused Rachel Corrie and other members of the International Solidarity Movement of "illegal, irresponsible and dangerous" behaviour.

The investigation, led by the chief of the general staff of the Israeli Defence Force, claimed that Rachel was standing "behind a mound of earth" and "was hidden from the view of the vehicle's operator, who continued with his work." The official whitewash continued: "Corrie was struck by dirt and a slab of concrete resulting in her death."

Tom Wallace of the ISM told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "When they didn't charge the driver for Rachel's murder, this sent a signal out to every trigger-happy soldier that it was open season on peace activists. There would be no repercussions, no comeback."

The right-wing coalition government led by Ariel Sharon and the Israeli military can only carry on this way because of the tacit approval of the Bush administration in the United States and the Blair government in Britain.

The Bush administration has refused to even protest the attacks on its citizens, let alone offer protection. The US Consulate has stated in response to an appeal by the ISM, "We do not accept any responsibility for anyone who

ignores our travel advisories and illegally enters the Gaza Strip."

The State Department refused to condemn the murder of Rachel Corrie and has kept silent on the shooting of Brian Avery. Rachel Corrie's parents, Craig and Cynthia from Washington, had called on the State Department to investigate the death of their daughter, while her friends and colleagues demanded an independent investigation. But the State Department simply endorsed the very investigation by the Israeli authorities that has produced a whitewash of the IDF.

Tom Hurndall's father, Anthony, said, "The Israeli government and the Israeli military will have something to answer for. There will be questions. I want to know what happened. I want it to be brought to light... The only way that the truth about this incident will be established is if the British government demands and carries out a full investigation."

But to date Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Office has issued no statement on the shooting of Tom. A press officer told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the consulate general was "deeply concerned" and was "pressing for a full and transparent investigation," but no government minister has said a word and the issue of an independent investigation has not been raised.

Equally culpable is the US and British media, which has barely reported either the killing of Rachel Corrie or the shootings of Avery and Hurndall.

No unsubstantiated Pentagon-inspired rumour about Saddam Hussein's alleged possession of chemical and biological agents fails to be extensively reported—in an attempt by the media to retroactively justify a war that was supposedly waged to eliminate the threat from weapons of mass destruction.

Yet while the press and TV rejoice at how the Ba'athist regime has been destroyed—a regime that never killed a single US or British civilian—they are silent on Israel's outrages against the Palestinians and its killing of foreign peace and civil rights activists, including American and British citizens.



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