Israel: Brutal crackdown on anti-occupation activists

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The response of the army, judiciary and the government of Ariel Sharon to Jewish opponents of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza—and to foreign peace activists—is becoming ever more brutal.

Israeli protester Gil Na'amati was shot in the legs by Israeli Defence Forces troops during a demonstration against the West Bank separation fence on December 27 near the village of Maskha. In a demonstration organised by Anarchists Against the Fence, the protesters were cutting a length of the fence when they were met with live fire by the IDF—seriously injuring Na'amati and slightly injuring an American citizen.

The IDF regularly use live ammunition to disperse Palestinians, but this was the first time troops have opened fire on Jewish protesters.

A military investigation later found the soldiers were following the rules of engagement. The IDF said in a statement, "Given all the factors involved, including the fact that the soldiers felt they were under a real threat, the lack of accessible riot control gear and the rules of engagement the force was operating under, there was no deviation from the normal rules of engagement."

IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon told reporters he had "full confidence in the testimony of the soldiers, who said they felt threatened" by the demonstrators and "did not believe they were dealing with Israelis."

Earlier Anarchists Against the Wall and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel had organised a press conference during which Na'amati's father, Uri, said, "One must be drunk to believe the IDF's version" of the circumstances of the shooting.

Uri Na'amati said the IDF soldiers "not only shot Gil, but also failed to evacuate him, lied, and did not learn their lesson. The IDF version has only one true element—the shooter's name."

According to reports, the material presented at the press conference and an independent probe by *Haaretz* newspaper disproves many of the army's claims.

Video footage taken using three cameras at the site of the shooting shows that contrary to the IDF statements, the soldiers could not have believed their lives were in danger. The soldiers were also aware that the protesters were Israelis, because the distance between the troops and the demonstrators was just 26 meters rather than the 100 meters claimed by Ya'alon when speaking to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee. Protesters were shouting at the soldiers in Hebrew.

The footage proves that the soldiers had not warned the demonstrators before shooting at them. It shows that soldiers were in shooting posture even when demonstrators were only shaking the fence. They could not have felt threatened because there was no chance the demonstrators could get through to the settlement behind the soldiers. Zionist settlers felt safe enough to cheer and dance beside the soldiers in the back of a pickup truck and were not prevented from doing so by the IDF.

The IDF also maintained that Na'amati was "the chief instigator" of violence, but the video shows he arrived late on the scene and was not masked as the army claimed.

Israel began to build what it calls a security fence and its opponents often refer to as "The Wall" in June 2002. Costing US$1.8 billion, the barrier slices through the Occupied Territories splitting villages in two and preventing free movement and access for Palestinians to vital services such as schools.

On New Year's Day around 15 people were wounded as they took part in another protest against the construction of the security fence. Two of those injured were foreign peace activists who were taking part in the third such protest in the West Bank village of Budrus, near Modi'in.

Some 30 protesters and one border policeman were injured.

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The security fence runs along the western edge of Bodrus, cutting off some farmers from their land. After a hundred-strong protest march, some youths began throwing stones at soldiers who responded with a volley of tear gas and plastic bullets. The IDF imposed a curfew on the village and carried out house-to-house searches. Five Palestinians were arrested.

Four Israelis and four foreigners were also arrested, including Swedish Green Party MP Gustav Fridolin, who was later freed and escorted onto a flight to Stockholm by Swedish Embassy officials. Fridolin said that the arresting soldiers had "manhandled" him. The other three foreigners were Fredrik Batzler from Sweden and Americans Katherine Rafael and Kimberly Gray.

Many of those arrested are activists with the International Solidarity Movement, which has been targeted for particularly vicious treatment by the Israeli state.

In March 2003, US citizen Rachel Corrie, 23, was murdered by the IDF while trying to stop an army bulldozer demolishing Palestinian homes in the Rafah refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. On April 5, US citizen Brian Avery, 24, was shot in the face in Jenin by IDF soldiers. On April 11, British citizen Tom Hurndall was a shot in the head while helping Palestinian children flee the scene of IDF gunfire in the Rafah. He has been in a coma ever since and is expected to die. It was only this month that an IDF soldier admitted to shooting Hurndall, claiming it was a deterrence shot.

Since the start of the Palestinian *intifada*, the Israeli military police have opened only 72 inquiries, and only 13 prosecutions have resulted from these.

In another expression of the hard-line stance being taken against internal opponents of the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, on July 4 the military court in Jaffa imposed one-year prison sentences on five conscientious objectors who refused to enlist in the IDF. This is the first time since 1981 that conscripts have been tried in a military court for refusing to serve in the armed forces on grounds of conscience.

Haggai Matar, Matan Kaminer, Shimri Zameret, Adam Maor and Noam Bahat are high school students who signed a letter almost two years ago refusing to enlist in the IDF as long as it continued to function as an occupying army.

They were put in trial for nine months before being convicted of gross insubordination for refusing to obey an order. The three judges denounced the five conscientious objectors as draft dodgers who were giving Israel a bad name during a period of conflict that demanded national unity. The 14 months that the protesters have already served in detention will not be deducted from their sentences. One of the judges had recommended harsher sentences of up to 22 months. Draft-dodging bears a maximum penalty of three years in jail.

The court ruled that the objectors' freedom to follow their conscience must be balanced against its impact on national security. The court also insisted that as the five acted as a group with the explicit goal of bringing about a change in Israeli policy, their action was not conscientious objection but civil disobedience.

Most significantly the judges ruled that the sentences were meant to serve as a warning to others, especially in light of the recent spate of elite reservists refusing to serve in the territories. The military prosecutor added that the sentence was "significant for the State of Israel" and would force the five to "understand the error of their delinquent ways."

Hundreds of soldiers have refused to serve in the West Bank and Gaza, including recently 13 members of the elite Sayeret Matkal unit. A group of 27 Israeli Air Force pilots also issued a letter last September declaring their refusal to take part in military operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Far more are evading the draft by citing medical reasons or religious objections. Hence, the determination of the courts to make an example of five young students, when dissenters more typically face a month or so in detention.

The five young men refused to be intimidated. Shimri Tzameret predicted, "Ethical people will follow in our footsteps. The coming months will see other conscientious objectors like us undergoing this process."

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