

United Nations report: Israeli forces have inflicted a “reign of terror”

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A recent report by John Dugard, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights’ Special Rapporteur, stated that Israeli forces had “inflicted a reign of terror upon innocent Palestinians in the course of their assassinations of militants in densely populated towns, their destruction of homes, and their random firing in built up areas—not to mention the methodical intimidation and humiliation of civilians at checkpoints.”

Dugard’s report is an addendum to the Special Rapporteur’s report of September 2003. After visiting the Occupied Territories last February, he said that the situation was characterised by serious violations of general international law, of human rights law and of international humanitarian law.

His mandate was to investigate Israel’s “violations of the principles and bases of international law, international humanitarian law and the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons of 1949” in the Occupied Territories.

The Israeli Defence Force has openly flouted all the international conventions aimed at securing humane treatment for people under occupation. Despite the fact that more than 2,500 Palestinians have died at the hands of the Israeli armed forces since September 2000, the start of the intifada, only 15 soldiers have been charged, usually with minor offences.

The world’s press has studiously ignored Dugard’s report. Yet it came as the Sharon government—secure in the knowledge that it has Washington’s unconditional support in its criminal venture—had stepped up its campaign of murder, collective punishment and house demolitions against Palestinian civilians in Gaza, illegally occupied along with the West Bank since 1967, that culminated in the March 22 assassination of the spiritual leader of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin.

Since the beginning of 2004, the IDF has killed more than 140 Palestinians and wounded more than 200, mostly children. Each month has seen an increase in the death toll. Thirty-two Palestinians were killed in January and 52 in February. In just the first two weeks of March, 44 have been killed, 30 of whom were killed in Gaza.

The giant ghetto that is the Gaza Strip has borne the brunt of Israel’s military and economic repression.

On March 21, the day prior to Yassin’s assassination, the Israeli military mounted a predawn operation against Abassan, a village near Khan Yunis, a refugee camp in the south of the Gaza Strip, killing one Palestinian militant and at least four other Palestinians.

On March 17, Israeli forces used tanks and helicopter gun ships to attack Gaza, killing four Palestinians. The day before, security forces killed seven Palestinians and bulldozed houses. The Israeli cabinet had authorised the assassinations of militant Palestinian leaders and ground operations in Gaza after a double suicide bomb attack killed 12 people in the port of Ashdod, just north of Gaza, on March 14.

Hamas and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade claimed responsibility for the bombings, saying that they were in revenge for the killing of five al-Aqsa members in Jenin. A militant leader in Gaza told the Associated Press that the bombers had intended to blow fuel storage tanks in Ashdod. But the

explosions went off several hundred metres from the fuel tanks. The bombings were embarrassing for the Israeli authorities since Gaza is surrounded by an electronic fence—similar to that now being put in place in the West Bank—making it impossible to leave Gaza without going through the checkpoints and facing humiliating security checks. The IDF has credited the electronic fence with stopping attacks in the past and used it as the justification for the “security wall” in the West Bank.

On March 13, Israeli forces shot and killed two young Palestinian men near the Nahal Oz crossing east of Gaza City. According to the Palestinian news agency WAFA, they had been shot in the head and their bodies disfigured.

On March 10, a one-month-old baby died as Israeli soldiers prevented an ambulance from taking him to a hospital in Khan Yunis. They had held up the ambulance for more than an hour at a checkpoint.

On March 7, Israeli armed forces launched tank and helicopter gun ship attacks on two refugee camps, Nusseirat and el-Buriej. They cut the electricity and telephone lines between the camps and Gaza City and raided buildings, firing randomly into the streets, detaining residents and forcing people to act as human shields walking in front of the soldiers as they searched the buildings. The IDF killed 14 Palestinians, including four children. At least 72 Palestinians were wounded.

On March 6, Israeli forces killed six Palestinians when militants using fake Israeli army jeeps tried to storm the main Erez crossing point between the Gaza Strip and Israel.

On March 3, an Israeli missile attack on a car killed three Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip.

In February, without any provocation, Israeli soldiers shot a 15-year-old in the back at close range in his own home, paralysing him from the waist down. The shooting of the boy, the son of a school head teacher, took place in front of two British aid workers who were visiting the family on behalf of the UN. It was part of a systematic campaign of intimidation, abuse and threats against the family aimed at forcing them to leave their home. They lived in a relatively isolated area next to the Zionist settlement of Kfar Darom.

Within the Gaza Strip, most of Israel’s fire has been concentrated upon Rafah. Of the 15,000 people that the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) believes have been made homeless by house demolitions carried out by the IDF, two thirds of them are from Rafah, in southern Gaza. Thousands of homes have been damaged.

The scale of the devastation dwarfs that of Jenin in April 2002.

Since last October, more than 200 homes have been demolished and 2,000 people made homeless. In 2003, the rate of house demolitions doubled. Last October, in just one raid, the IDF demolished 189 homes and three multi-story apartment blocks, killing 15 people and making 1,780 people homeless. The Commissioner General of UNRWA, Peter Hansen, has described the latest demolitions as “a hugely disproportionate military response.” Last January, he had said that the Palestinians affected by the demolition policy could “hardly be blamed if they come to believe

that they are the victims of collective punishment."

Dugard stated that the measures taken by Israel were out of all proportion to the dangers Israeli citizens faced. He said, "the question must be asked whether some of the actions taken by Israel are primarily concerned with the achievement of security. Checkpoints seem to have as one of their goals the humiliation of the Palestinian people while the Wall, when it enters Palestinian territory, seems to be mainly aimed at the seizure of land for purposes unrelated to security."

According to a report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) last January, the IDF has used house demolitions to create a buffer zone several kilometres long and up to 200 metres wide that stretches from Rafah passenger terminal in the east down to the coast. Some of those made homeless have moved into inferior buildings that are usually far too small. Others have moved north in search of accommodation while a few have moved into homes abandoned by families that feared their homes would be demolished next.

With 1.3 million people hemmed into a tiny strip of land, making Gaza one of the most densely populated areas in the world, land is scarce. Even before the latest round of house demolitions, UNRWA estimated that it would cost \$25 million to rehouse all the people who had lost their homes and has appealed for funds to help it house the refugees.

More and more homeless families are relying on tents provided by UNRWA and the International Committee of the Red Crescent (ICRC) for shelter. In the month from December 21, the ICRC supplied 243 families in Rafah with tents.

When their homes are demolished, the Palestinians lose everything: their furniture, cooking equipment, clothes and bedding.

The terrible plight of the families in Rafah is evidenced by their increasing reliance on aid agencies for food. The World Food Programme now provides food for 5,026 families, compared with 3,472 families in August 2003.

The curfews and roadblocks have made travel to work, school and hospital, all but impossible and brought the majority of the population close to starvation. Average per capita income is believed to be less than \$600 per year, with 75 percent of the people living in poverty. With the population increasing at the rate of four percent a year, half are 15-years-old or younger. The high level of unemployment means that impoverished families are unable to feed their children properly and 13 percent of children are suffering from acute malnutrition.

Last December, UNRWA launched an emergency appeal for \$193 million to relieve the desperate plight of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. This is a drop in the ocean compared to what is needed. UNRWA feeds more than one million people, a third of the total Palestinian population, and provides shelter for the homeless, medical services and work programmes for the unemployed.

A recent OCHA report described the terrible impact the military incursions, roadblocks and house demolitions, particularly in Rafah, had had on women and children:

* A staggering 52 women had given birth at military checkpoints since 2002.

* Nineteen women and 29 newborn babies had died at military checkpoints between September 2000 and December 2002.

* The number of babies born at home had risen from 8.2 percent in 2002 to 14 percent.

* The number of women attending post-natal care had fallen from 95.6 percent in 2002 to 82.4 percent.

* Thirty-eight percent of mothers had reported that access to healthcare had become more difficult. Forty-four percent said that this was due to the Israeli siege and curfew. Twenty-eight percent said that they lacked the money to pay for treatment.

UNRWA reported that there had been a 35 percent drop in the proportion of babies less than six months completing immunisation

programmes. A Save the Children survey found that:

* Ninety-three percent of Palestinian children felt unsafe.

* More than half felt that their parents could no longer protect them.

* Half the children surveyed had witnessed violence affecting an immediate family member.

* Twenty-one percent had had to flee their home for a period because of the conflict.

* Almost all parents reported traumatic behaviour including nightmares, bedwetting, increased aggression and hyperactivity.

Israel's reign of terror in Gaza and the West Bank has escalated since Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced last December that Israel would withdraw from the Zionist settlements in Gaza. Some 7,500 Zionists occupy 10 percent of the land in Gaza, where they live in heavily guarded settlements amid 1.3 million Palestinians. The withdrawal, if implemented, is aimed at securing US support for his land grab in the West Bank and East Jerusalem where more than 430,000 Israeli settlers live.

Sharon's campaign of murder and intimidation is aimed at weakening the Palestinian militant groups and forcing as many people as possible to leave Gaza. His solution to the Palestinian question is a combination of genocide and ethnic cleansing.

Even if the withdrawal plan were implemented, it would result in Palestinians living in a ghetto that would be no more independent than the so-called homelands that apartheid South Africa set up for black Africans. The Israeli army would continue to brutalise the Palestinians whenever the Israeli government deemed that the ruling elites had not done enough to suppress the population, which would remain economically dependent upon Israel.

This is not enough for Sharon. By perpetuating and intensifying the economic and military repression of the Palestinian people, he has paved the way for the growth of the parties and organisations that have carried out the suicide attacks on Israeli citizens. Support for the Islamic parties has grown by 60 percent since the start of the intifada, weakening the Palestinian Authority and Yasser Arafat's ruling Fatah party. The political infighting and a collapse of law and order are now pushing Gaza towards civil war between the Fatah controlled Palestinian Authority and Hamas and other Islamic factions. Having destroyed the Palestinian Authority's physical infrastructure, Sharon aims to foment an internal power struggle and civil war.



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