

Bush refuses to condemn deadly attack on unarmed youth

Israeli massacre of demonstrators in southern Gaza

Barry Grey
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In an open and wanton act of mass murder, Israeli forces on Wednesday fired on some 2,000 unarmed Palestinians who were peacefully demonstrating in the southern Gaza town of Rafah to protest the ongoing Israeli invasion of the adjoining Rafah refugee camp. At least 10 of the marchers, who for the most part consisted of youth and young teenagers, are confirmed dead and least 50 others were wounded.

According to local witnesses and medical staff, the death toll from Wednesday's attack could mount to 20. The majority of those killed and wounded were women and children, medical sources told a correspondent for *Aljazeera*. Dr. Moawiya Hassanain, a Palestinian Health Ministry official, said 36 of the wounded were critically injured.

While foreign leaders such as Britain's Tony Blair, Spain's Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan deplored the mass killings, US President Bush issued a statement Wednesday that pointedly omitted any criticism of Israel. Washington's political responsibility for the atrocity was underscored by Bush's remarks the previous day, when, speaking before a pro-Israeli lobby group, he defended the Israeli invasion of the Rafah refugee camp, saying Israel had "every right to defend itself from terror."

The Rafah protesters were marching toward the besieged refugee camp when, in broad daylight and without any provocation, Israeli helicopters fired missiles and occupation troops fired tank shells into the crowd, according to local witnesses. The attack was captured by Associated Press Television crews, whose news footage showed a large explosion going off in the crowd, followed by Palestinians carrying the wounded,

including children and teenagers, from the chaotic and smoke-filled scene.

Israeli authorities later admitted firing four tank shells, a missile, and machine gun rounds in the vicinity of the demonstrators, but claimed the weapons were aimed at a nearby building and intended to serve as a warning against the march proceeding further toward an Israeli military checkpoint near the entrance to the refugee camp.

However, Palestinian witnesses insist that a number of tank shells were fired into the crowd, as well as missiles from an Apache helicopter that was circling overhead. Palestinian Foreign Minister Nabil Shaath told the Associated Press that the attack was "a terrorist massacre and a terrorist war crime." Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat called the strike "genocide" and a "massacre that stands against all humane, civilized and political principles."

The wounded were evacuated to the Rafah Hospital by ambulance, private cars and donkey carts. The hospital stairs and floors were drenched in blood as doctors called out for help and blood donations. Medical staff treated the wounded on the floors after quickly running out of hospital beds.

Thousands of Palestinians marched in Gaza City Wednesday evening to condemn the Israeli attack, and some 1,000 people marched in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

The mass killing came on the second day of a full-scale Israeli invasion of the Tel Sultan neighborhood of the refugee camp, which lies close to the border between southern Gaza and Egypt. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) moved into Tel Sultan in the early morning hours of Tuesday, May 18 in what may be the

biggest Israeli army operation in Gaza since the 1967 Six Day War.

Employing scores of armored bulldozers, tanks, helicopter gunships and a large infantry force, the Israelis imposed a reign of terror on the densely populated and impoverished neighborhood. An estimated 37 Palestinians, mostly civilians, have been killed by the IDF since the invasion began early Tuesday. The United Nations estimates that 1,600 Palestinians have been left homeless and 100 Palestinian houses have been destroyed by the Israeli military since the weekend.

The IDF imposed a 24-hour curfew, cut off water and electricity to the besieged area, and posted snipers to shoot down any residents who attempted to emerge from their homes. As part of their perversely named “Operation Rainbow,” Israeli soldiers ordered by loudspeaker all males over 16 to gather in one place or risk demolition of family homes. There were reports of Israeli soldiers using Palestinians as human shields in house-to-house searches for militants. Israeli forces also blocked ambulances from entering the besieged neighborhood.

Israeli authorities claim the mass killings on Wednesday were unintentional, by they were entirely in line with the basic design of the invasion of the refugee camp. The government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon implemented the attack, reportedly drawn up far in advance, as part of its plan to dismantle the small number of Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip, pull Israeli forces out of the area, and surround the hotbed of Palestinian resistance with a cordon of Israeli troops. The assault on the Rafah camp is aimed at forcing a mass flight of Palestinian refugees and facilitating the establishment of an Israeli-controlled buffer zone between southern Gaza and the Egyptian border.

This, in turn, is part of Sharon’s scheme to alter the “facts on the ground” so as to make a large number of Israeli settlements on the West Bank permanent and annex the bulk of West Bank territory. Last month the Bush administration unilaterally gave its sanction to the Israeli land grab—which violates long-standing UN resolutions—and, at the same time, declared the “right of return” of Palestinian refugees to their former homes within Israel to be null and void.

The latest Israeli aggression incorporates the most brutal methods of colonial warfare, such as mass

reprisals, collective punishment and ethnic cleansing. Lionel Brisson, director of operations for the UN Relief and Works Agency, said of the situation in the refugee camp: “The Palestinians in Rafah are living in hell.”

On Tuesday, even as Israeli forces were invading the camp, Amnesty International (AI) issued a damning report accusing Israel of committing a war crime by destroying more than 3,000 Palestinian homes in Israel and the occupied territories since the intifada began three-and-a-half years ago. AI said Israel had destroyed buildings and “vast areas” of agricultural land, and warned that “punitive forced evictions and house demolitions” were a “flagrant form of collective punishment” that “violate a fundamental principle of international law.”

The IDF moved into the Tel Sultan neighborhood after the Israeli Supreme Court lifted a temporary injunction Sunday, allowing the Israeli military to continue demolishing Palestinian homes in the Rafah camp.

In the face of the international outcry following Wednesday’s massacre, Washington adjusted its earlier posture of tacit endorsement of Israeli atrocities to strike a more “even-handed” pose. A US State Department official said Washington opposed “the demolition of homes of innocent Palestinians,” and the US abstained, rather than vetoing, a UN Security Council resolution calling on Israeli to stop demolishing homes in southern Gaza. The resolution passed by a 14-0 vote.

At the same time, the State Department reiterated its support for the Sharon land-grab plan.

Late Wednesday, Israel launched another missile attack on the Rafah camp, killing three Palestinian militants.



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