

Deaths of schoolchildren expose Israeli brutality

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The increasing viciousness and brutality of the Zionist regime has been laid bare during its ongoing incursion into Gaza, code-named Operation Days of Penitence. The wanton destruction of homes and property and the deliberate targeting of civilians are aimed at terrorising the Palestinian population and give no prospect of an end to the violence.

The scale of the regime's repression is in turn both creating despair amongst the Palestinians, leading them to increasingly desperate measures, and brutalising the Israeli soldiers who are ordered to perpetrate these appalling acts.

In one of the most emotive incidents, two separate investigations were ordered into the death of a 13-year-old girl who was gunned down on her way to school on October 5. Soldiers from the Givati Brigade testified that the girl received 20 gunshot wounds when their company commander "emptied his magazine" at her after she had been shot and was presumed dead.

The girl, Iman al-Hams, strayed too close to an army checkpoint in Rafah and was shot when her schoolbag was thought to contain explosives. The commander stepped forward and shot her already prone body twice in an illegal practice known as "confirming the kill." He then withdrew a short distance before firing a burst of automatic fire at the corpse. Under open fire regulations, soldiers may only fire when their lives are in danger.

The soldiers, from the Givati Brigade's crack Shaked Battalion, are quoted in *Yediot Ahronot* as saying that their commander should have been relieved of his post immediately after the incident. "The company CO who sprayed the girl with bullets turned us all into vicious animals and besmirched us all," said one soldier. "If he is not dismissed, we will not agree to serve under him." Others talked of the desecration of the body.

The Judge Advocate General, Brigadier General Avi Mandelblit, instructed the military police to launch a criminal investigation against the CO, in addition to that being run by the army. In the past four years, the army has investigated only a small number of soldiers for the shooting of Palestinians, and the inquiries typically take months and seldom result in criminal proceedings.

True to form, on October 15, it was reported that the army investigation had cleared the CO of "unethical" behaviour over the young girl's death. The inquiry effectively ignored the statements of the soldiers who witnessed the incident, accepting the commander's claim that he had fired into the ground near to the girl.

A statement by the army said that its "investigation did not find that the company or the company commander had acted unethically."

"The investigation concluded that the behaviour of the company commander from an ethical point of view does not warrant his removal from his position," it continued.

The commander remains suspended on the grounds of his poor "relationship" with subordinates—i.e., those who had reported him.

The military police investigation has yet to conclude.

In a separate incident in the Khan Younis refugee camp in southern Gaza, an 11-year-old Palestinian girl was shot on October 12 whilst in her classroom in a United Nations-run elementary school. The girl, Ghadeer Mokheimer, subsequently died of her injuries. The Israeli army claims that it fired into the compound after mortar shells were launched from there towards Israeli settlements, a claim the UN denies.

The Israel Defence Forces' latest incursion into Gaza is ostensibly in response to a Qassam rocket attack that killed two school children in Sderot, a border town, on

September 29. The IDF's intention is to seek retribution against the Palestinian population and to create a 6- to 9-kilometre-wide buffer zone in northern Gaza (the maximum range of a homemade Qassam rocket) to protect Israeli settlements. This echoes attempts to halt Hezbollah attacks on Israel in the 1990s, when the Zionists sought to create a buffer zone in southern Lebanon.

Around 127 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza since the launch of Operation Days of Penitence two weeks ago, including some 24 children.

For the first time in two years, Israeli tanks have thrust into Jabaliyah refugee camp in Gaza, home to some 100,000 Palestinians. The Gaza Strip is the most densely populated place on earth, and Jabaliyah is the most densely populated part of Gaza. The IDF is firing tank shells and mortars at will within Gaza and Jabaliyah, ostensibly against those suspected of terrorism. Precision targeting in such populated areas is impossible and necessarily kills innocent civilians. Around 27 Palestinians were killed the first day after the Qassam attack.

Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has called for even harsher methods and wants the army to destroy Gaza's power and water infrastructure to put further pressure on the Palestinians.

In the four years of fighting sparked by Sharon's provocative intervention onto the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem in 2000, some 3,454 Palestinians have been killed by army fire according to AFP figures, including around 400 Palestinians under 16 years old.

Sharon's intervention was intended to initiate a cycle of violence that would allow Israel to shelve any negotiations and push for a Greater Israel policy, in which the Palestinians are squeezed into ever-smaller patches of land under the guise of protecting Israel's borders. The current incursion into Gaza is not a response to Sderot but is rather the latest in a long line of provocations.

The Israeli parliament, the Knesset, is due to vote on October 25 on the question of withdrawing 7,500 Israeli settlers from Gaza. The majority of the right wing is dead set against this, which they see as a betrayal by Sharon, and intend to fight it all the way. The ongoing brutality in Gaza is intended in part to appease these rabid elements.



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