

Israel moves to impede UN relief to Palestinians

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Israel has mounted a political campaign based on lies against the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), alleging that it has aided Palestinian terrorists.

The aim of the Israeli government is to discredit the attempts of the United Nations—feeble as they are—to expose the crimes being committed by Israel in the occupied territories, and prevent UNRWA from delivering aid to the Palestinians. Not accidentally, the smear against UNRWA coincides with Israel's military offensive against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

Israel's Operation Days of Penitence has left more than 100 dead, mostly unarmed civilians, including children, and many more injured. This is more than the total number of Israeli losses since the start of 2004. It has been carried out ostensibly in retaliation for five Israeli fatalities.

The latest campaign and the accompanying offensive of lies and provocations is aimed at starving the Palestinians into submission or driving them out of the Gaza Strip, while at the same time ensuring that there are no witnesses to report what is happening on the ground.

It flows organically from Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's determination to expand Israel's borders at the expense of the Palestinians and his knowledge that he has the full backing of the Bush administration, which has nothing but contempt for international law and does not hesitate to flout the UN when it cuts across US interests.

Last September, the Israeli security forces overrode international conventions and imposed restrictions on UNRWA staff's freedom of movement through the Erez crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip. They forced international staff holding UN *Laissez-Passers* to get out of their vehicles and cross on foot through the Palestinian terminals. Since the UN could not possibly expose its staff to such dangers, the effect was to prevent UN international staff from crossing in and out of Gaza.

Even after UN staff on their way to Tel Aviv airport had been given explicit permission by the UN Designated Official for Security, Israeli security forces subjected them to humiliating searches.

As a result of Israeli restrictions, UNRWA's international staff have left Gaza for Israel.

On October 1, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) released a video to the international press that it claimed showed "a UN vehicle transporting a Qassem rocket" and alleged that the UN was aiding Palestinian terrorists. Palestinian militants have used home-made Qassem rockets against Israeli settlements. Although the overwhelming majority of these rockets have been ineffectual, one killed two children, sparking Operation Days of Penitence.

Under conditions in which the IDF was killing and maiming

hundreds of Palestinians, bulldozing their homes and terrorising the population, the accusation against the UN agency was calculated to give the IDF a green light to shoot at UNRWA ambulances and other aid vehicles.

Israel's claim was risible. Even Israeli viewers could see through the grainy images on their TV screens that the alleged weapon was not a rocket. The clipping showed an UNRWA ambulance and one of its three-member crew carrying a long, thin, light object that he threw easily into the back of the ambulance. The object was a folded stretcher.

As UNRWA's commissioner general, Peter Hansen, explained, "While the quality of the video clip is poor, its analysis showed beyond a shadow of a doubt that the object carried and thrown into the vehicle is not and cannot be a Qassem rocket. I have been told that a Qassem rocket weighs at least 32 kg and its diameter is approximately 17 cm. On neither count does the object shown in the film correspond in the least to this description. It is much thinner, longer and obviously much lighter than a rocket. In my mind, and in that of those whom I have consulted, it is clearly a folded stretcher, a logical and indispensable accessory in any ambulance."

Hansen demanded an apology from the Sharon government. UNRWA warned that these malicious allegations were a prelude to more aggressive behaviour by Israel towards the UN in general and UN humanitarian staff in particular that would endanger the lives of UN personnel.

The IDF was forced to make a humiliating climb-down and remove the video clipping from its web site. IDF Chief of Operations Israel Yiv said, "The IDF is not free of mistakes." In a truly bizarre moment, when asked about whether the object was a rocket or a stretcher, he replied, "I suggest we don't deal with the object but rather with the context."

Undeterred by the lack of evidence, Ziv not only refused to apologise for the false allegations, but continued the attack on UNRWA, saying that regardless of what the filmed object actually was, UNRWA employees "are exploiting the organisation's vehicles in order to support terror-related activities."

Hansen said that this was not the first time Israel had made false allegations against UNRWA. Israel had targeted UNRWA and Hansen whenever extensive Israeli military incursions into the Palestinian occupied territories had resulted in large-scale casualties.

A few months earlier, two cabinet ministers had said publicly that UNRWA ambulances were carrying the body parts of Israeli soldiers. When challenged to produce evidence to back up their claim, or retract their statement and apologise, the ministers remained silent.

On other occasions, Israel complained that Hansen had exaggerated

reports of house demolitions by the IDF in Rafah and had denounced Israel in strong language.

On October 5, with its story of UNRWA carrying weapons for terrorists exposed as a fabrication, the IDF made another false claim. General Yisrael Ziv announced that the IDF had detained 13 UNRWA staff in Gaza who were to be indicted on suspicion of links to terrorism. This too turned out to be false.

Army spokesman Captain Jacob Dalal said that the words had been taken out of context, and that the detentions had, in fact, taken place over the last four years.

Some idea of the breach of international law and the intimidation of UN staff carried out by Israel can be seen from a statement by UN officials in New York. It said that in the 12 months to June 2004, 34 UNRWA staff had been arrested or detained by the Israeli authorities in the West Bank and Gaza. Most had been held without charge, and UNRWA had received no official information about the reasons for their detentions.

Hansen became embroiled in a separate controversy when he acknowledged in a Canadian media interview that some of UNRWA's 24,000 Palestinian staff were probably members of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic party. "I'm sure that there are Hamas members on the UNRWA payroll", Hansen said.

He continued, "I don't see that as a crime. Hamas as a political organisation does not mean that every member is a militant and we do not do political vetting and exclude people from one persuasion as against another. We demand our staff, whatever their political persuasion, behave in accordance with UN standards and norms for neutrality."

Israel has sought to use this and the Qassem rocket affair to get rid of Hansen and discredit the whole UNRWA operation. Israel's ambassador to the UN, Dan Gilerman, sent a letter to UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan demanding Hansen's dismissal, protesting at Hamas's alleged use of UN vehicles to smuggle arms and terrorists through the Gaza Strip, and insisting on an investigation.

It had the desired effect. The Canadian Foreign Ministry issued a statement that "if it turns out that Hansen's statements were not taken out of context, and in case they represent the position of UNRWA, we are deeply concerned and will request clarifications from Mr. Hansen and the UN."

Canada contributes \$50 million annually to UNRWA, and in November 2002 placed both the political and military wings of Hamas on its list of terrorist organisations, making any assistance to the group by a Canadian citizen illegal. It could use Israel's false allegations to end its contributions to UNRWA.

Far from rejecting the claims outright and demanding that Israel stop its attacks and provocations against UNRWA, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan announced that he would send a team to investigate the accusations.

The UN established UNRWA as a temporary humanitarian agency in 1949 in the aftermath of the establishment of the state of Israel that led to the expulsion and flight of more 700,000 Palestinians from their homes in the British Mandate territory of Palestine. Its role is to provide relief and aid to the Palestinian refugees. As a temporary agency that reports directly to the UN General Assembly, its charter is up for renewal in June 2005.

The registered refugees dating from 1948 and their descendants, plus those made refugees after the 1967 war, live in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, or Syria and now number 4.1 million. But this considerably underestimates the number of those displaced by Israel,

since it covers only those who lost both their homes and their means of livelihood.

Since the Palestinians were to receive assistance from UNRWA, they were explicitly and intentionally excluded from the international refugee law established under a 1951 convention and from the provenance of the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Donations have not kept pace with inflation and the rising refugee population. This has led to a fall in annual spending per refugee from \$200 in 1975 to \$79 in 2004.

Given its fragile funding basis, UNRWA has been forced to launch repeated appeals for emergency funding. While its expected budget for this year is \$350 million, the shortfall in actual contributions led to an emergency appeal for \$193 million in June 2004.

UNRWA is responsible for running its education, health, and relief and social services, which are located inside and outside the refugee camps. It provides temporary employment to local workers in its various relief and social programmes.

More than half its budget is spent on education programmes. But Israel's continuing military offensive against the Palestinians in the occupied territories has disrupted education at all levels. Enrolment has declined and various programmes have been cut back due to lack of funding.

UNRWA is also responsible for the largest food aid programme in the West Bank and Gaza, with more than 188,000 families receiving food parcels in the six-month period to June 2004. But in the West Bank, curfews and closures imposed by Israel have resulted in food distribution being disrupted on 22 occasions.

The shortage in funds means that UNRWA is able to provide only 40 percent of nutritional requirements, instead of the 60 percent that is the agency's standard. Withdrawal of food parcels led to protests in some parts of the West Bank.

House demolitions by the Israeli army between September 2000 and June 2004 have left more than 21,000 people in Gaza homeless. More than 17,000 of these were registered refugees, adding to the work of the agency.

UNRWA's operations support officers (OSOs) have been crucial in ensuring some minimal emergency relief to Palestinians in Gaza and monitoring the humanitarian impact of the deteriorating situation and the consequences of Israel's security wall in the West Bank. In Gaza, OSOs have escorted UNRWA trucks as they distributed emergency food and water after Israeli military attacks. In the West Bank, 200,000 have lost their land, access to water, agricultural resources, and services under Phase I of the wall.

A recent UNRWA report documented the way that Israel has harassed the agency and prevented it from carrying out its work. In one incident, the IDF requisitioned UNRWA's compound in Tulkarm, detaining about 200 women and children overnight in the building, along with 10 UNRWA staff. On May 20, UNRWA's warehouse in Rafah, its main distribution centre and emergency relief coordination point, had to stop for one day after it came under sustained IDF fire and was damaged by IDF tanks. On some occasions, the IDF has even used UNRWA facilities as cover during its military attacks.



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