

# Israel: soldier admits he knew slain peace activist Hurndall was unarmed

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An Israeli soldier on trial for killing British peace activist Tom Hurndall in the Gaza Strip in 2003 has admitted that he lied when he said his victim was camouflaged and carrying a gun. He also claims that he was under orders to open fire on anyone, even unarmed people.

The admission further exposes the ruthless nature of Israel's illegal occupation of Palestine, and vindicates the fight by the family and supporters of Tom Hurndall to expose the truth and force a retrial.

Tom Hurndall, 22, from London, was studying photography at Manchester University when he arrived in the West Bank on April 4, 2003, to photograph the work of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). He joined its human shield force, acting as "buffers" between the Palestinians and the military, as part of an effort to oppose the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

On April 11, 2003, he was in the Rafah refugee camp with eight other members of the ISM and had been escorting children to safety during gunfire when snipers opened fire from a tower to the east and he was shot in the head. He was declared brain dead on arrival at Rafah Hospital and, after spending nine months in a coma, he died on January 13, 2004.

There is no question that his shooting was deliberate. At the time, an eyewitness and British ISM colleague Rafael Cohen reported that he was standing 15 metres away when the shooting occurred. Israeli troops were firing over the heads of a group of children playing on a mound of earth and Tom had gone to pull them to safety. "He was trying to pull two girls out of danger when he was hit in the head by a bullet," said Cohen.

"At first they were firing several metres over the children's heads but it was getting very, very dangerous so Tom went to help them. He was at ground level when they shot him directly in the head."

Sergeant Idier Wahid Taysir is charged with manslaughter for shooting Hurndall, though he denies it. He was initially charged with assault on December 2003, but the charges were upgraded when Hurndall died in January 2004.

The trial has been held at a court within a military base at Castina Junction in Ashkelon, near Tel Aviv. It opened on May 10, 2004, but has been adjourned for most of the time since.

The military investigation initially cleared Sgt. Taysir, but the trial was reopened under pressure from the Hurndall family. The British Foreign Office was also obliged to intervene after the army's account of the shooting was shown to be false.

Carl Arrindell, a family friend and spokesman for the Tom Hurndall Foundation, said that lawyers would also want to establish if any systemic causes led to the shooting and if responsibility for Mr. Hurndall's death lay higher up the chain of command.

Tom Hurndall's sister Sophie also attacked the army's actions, reasoning, "The fact that over 4,000 Palestinian civilians have been killed, and 79,000 seriously injured over the last few years, shows that there are no acceptable guidelines governing Israeli Defence Force behaviour."

Sgt. Taysir, who was with one of the IDF's Bedouin units based in Rafah, has also been charged with obstruction of justice. He told the court that he did not know details of the army's rules of engagement. "I don't know them. No one ever explained anything to me about these documents." Unable to read Hebrew, the army sergeant said he did not believe others in his unit had any more knowledge about "rules of engagement" than he did.

Taysir told the army investigators that he had opened fire at Hurndall because the Briton was on the edge of the security zone, carrying a weapon and wearing camouflage clothing. In fact, he had not entered the closed zone, had no gun and was wearing a bright orange jacket.

British *Guardian-online* reports that the sergeant told the military court that after shooting Hurndall he had reported it to his commander. "I told him that I did what I'm supposed to; anyone who enters a firing zone must be taken out. [The commander] always says this," he said.

The prosecutor then asked the sergeant if Mr. Hurndall had a weapon.

In a dramatic shift Sgt. Taysir replied: “No. That’s the truth.”

“So you gave a false report to the company commander?” the prosecutor asked.

“I did not give a false report. He might have had a weapon under his clothing. People fire freely there. The [Israeli army] fires freely in Rafah.”

The prosecutor continued: “But you told him that you saw a weapon?”

“Right.”

“So you lied?”

“I said it.”

The prosecutor then asked: “After that, you also reported that the man fired in the air and at you, right? Why did you report that he fired at you?”

The sergeant replied: “Because I had already fired without getting approval [from the company commander]. Everything was under pressure and a result of fear. They tell us all the time to fire; that there is approval. All the troops [in Rafah] fire without approval at anyone who crosses a red line.”

The *Guardian* reports Tom Hurndall’s mother, Jocelyn, welcoming the soldier’s testimony. She believes that it confirms the family’s belief that Sgt. Taysir was not a rogue element but operating under a military policy that permitted the shooting of unarmed civilians.

“We remain extremely concerned about the culture in which the soldier was functioning,” she said. “It seems from what he’s said that he was following orders, that he was doing what he was told to do and what other soldiers are told to do.”

News from this trial comes soon after confirmation that the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) is promoting a shoot-to-kill policy at the highest levels as evidenced by the recent killing of 13-year-old Iman al-Hams, gunned down in cold blood in Gaza.

The right-wing coalition government led by Ariel Sharon and the Israeli military is only able to behave the way it does because of the tacit approval of the US administration and the British government, who are keen to use the methods garnered in Occupied Palestine for use in the cities of Iraq and farther afield.

Hurndall was the third member of the ISM to be severely wounded or killed by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) in a month. The shooting is part of a pattern of attacks on the ISM, aimed at forcing them and other Western observers to leave the Occupied Territories and allow the IDF to proceed with its murder and repression of the Palestinians unhindered and unobserved. The IDF denied any knowledge of the shooting, despite admitting troops “offered medical assistance and airlifted [Tom] to a hospital in Beersheva.”

In March 2003, US citizen Rachel Corrie, 23, was crushed to death by the blade of an Israeli army bulldozer in Rafah while protecting the home of a Palestinian family. She was clearly recognisable as an international peace activist and peaceful protester. However an Israeli army whitewash into her death, led by the chief of the general staff of the IDF, concluded that its forces were not to blame and even accused Corrie and other members of the ISM of “illegal, irresponsible and dangerous” behaviour.

In April 2003, ISM activists Danish citizen Lasse Schmidt, 35, and US citizen Brian Avery, 24, were hit by shrapnel from an Israeli armoured personnel carrier while attempting to protect Palestinian children in Jenin who had ventured into the curfew-deserted streets. Two armoured personnel carriers advanced towards them at low speed. Despite having their hands raised above their heads and wearing fluorescent red vests identifying them as international peace activists, they were shot at from only 50 metres away. A burst of machinegun fire hit the ground in front of them so that they were sprayed by a shower of broken bullets and stones.

These incidents followed several others a month earlier where ISM volunteers had come under Israeli fire for approaching bulldozers. Some were injured.

The US State Department refused to condemn the Corrie murder and has kept silent on the Avery shooting. The State Department has simply endorsed the Israeli investigation which produced a whitewash of the IDF. The Bush administration has refused to even protest attacks on its citizens, let alone offered protection. The US Consulate’s response was, “We do not accept any responsibility for anyone who ignores our travel advisories and illegally enters the Gaza Strip.”



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