

Britain: government refuses to release information on Israeli killing of UN worker

Rick Kelly
26 March 2005

The Blair government has turned down a request from the British Broadcasting Corporation to release official information on the death of Iain Hook.

A British United Nations worker, Hook was shot and killed by the Israeli military on November 22, 2002. No one has been held accountable for his murder, which was one of a series of attacks on aid workers, peace activists and journalists by the Israeli army at the time.

The BBC reports that the government rejected its application for the classified material under the Freedom of Information Act on the grounds that “releasing information on the death could damage its relations with another state.”

John Gillan, of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, said the withheld information related to the “formulation or development of government policy” and that the government rejected the claim that public interest in the killing outweighed the need to maintain secrecy. In the opinion of the foreign office minister, Gillan added, some of the material was made up of private discussions between British and Israeli officials, and disclosure would therefore “inhibit the free and frank provision of advice.”

This extraordinary position has exposed the Labour government as co-conspirators in the Israeli authorities’ cover-up in the circumstances surrounding Hook’s death. At no time since the killing has the government pressed Israel for a full investigation of the incident and the prosecution of those responsible. Now it is actively intervening to suppress the facts of the case on behalf of its Middle East ally.

Hook, 54, was project manager for the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) and was based in the Palestinian refugee camp of Jenin at the time of his death. He was helping to rebuild the camp, after much of it had been obliterated during a two-week

Israeli siege in April 2002, in which the Israeli army demolished homes and massacred at least 50 Palestinians.

On November 22, Israeli soldiers swept back into the area, searching for Palestinian fighters. Hook had spent the morning speaking with Israeli commanders, in an attempt to negotiate a temporary ceasefire with the Palestinian militants that would enable the evacuation of UN workers and a disabled woman trapped in her home.

Instead Hook was shot in the back by an Israeli sniper after he walked into the courtyard of the UN compound. He died through loss of blood after soldiers delayed an ambulance from reaching the scene for 25 minutes.

Israeli officials immediately gave a succession of contradictory explanations. Military spokesmen first claimed that Hook was accidentally shot while he was standing near Palestinian militants. After this was quickly disproved, the official line was that Palestinian gunmen had opened fire from the UN site, and Hook had been mistaken for one of them after the mobile phone he was carrying was erroneously identified as a gun.

The UN subsequently issued a statement describing this claim as “totally incredible.” The incident occurred in broad daylight, and the sniper had shot Hook from a distance of only 25 metres, using a telescopic sight. No militants had entered the UN compound, and witnesses insisted that there had been no gunfire in the surrounding area for “tens of minutes.”

All of the circumstances surrounding the incident indicate that Hook was murdered. The Israeli military has a long track record of targeting foreign aid workers and activists assisting the Palestinian people in the Occupied Territories, particularly since the eruption of

the second Palestinian Intifada that began in September 2000.

A number of peace activists with the International Solidarity Movement have been wounded and murdered by Israeli forces. Rachel Corrie, an American, was killed March 16, 2003, by a bulldozer as she attempted to prevent the destruction of a Palestinian home. British citizen Tom Hurdnall was shot in April 2003 and as a consequence died in January 2004.

At least six journalists covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been killed since the beginning of the second Intifada, and several more have been wounded.

A clear pattern of intimidation and vengeance emerges from these incidents, which are routinely followed by Israeli denials. The circumstances of the deaths preclude the possibility that they were accidental incidents.

On April 19, 2003, for example, Associated Press cameraman Nazih Darwazeh was shot dead while filming an Israeli tank involved in a clash with Palestinian youth. The journalist was shot through the head from a distance of just 10-20 metres while he was wearing a fluorescent jacket marked “Press.” Thirteen days later, British cameraman and film director James Miller was killed in Gaza after he approached Israeli forces while he wore a jacket and helmet marked “TV” and carried a white flag for identification.

As far as the Israeli military is concerned, its occupation of Gaza and the West Bank has converted these territories into an effective free-fire zone. The shooting of foreigners is driven by its hostility towards anyone who attempts to bear witness to the crimes being inflicted upon the Palestinian people by the Zionist state.

Last June, British members of parliament visiting Gaza on a fact-finding trip were targeted as they toured the area where Tom Hurdnall was shot with UN officers. “Our UN companions later said that if they had wanted to kill us they would have, but it was certainly our group they were targeting and trying to scare,” Lindsay Northover, a Liberal-Democrat House of Lords Peer, said.

The impunity with which Israeli soldiers target foreign workers and visitors is another manifestation of the barbarism of the Israeli occupation and the reckless criminality of the Sharon government. Approximately 3,500 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces in

the past five years, and thousands more have been wounded or made homeless.

The UNRWA is particularly hated by the Israeli right for its work in the Palestinian refugee camps. Iain Hook was one of six UNRWA workers killed by Israeli troops in 2003, and there is evidence that his killers targeted him precisely because of his affiliation. Irish peace activist Caoimhe Butterly—who was shot in the thigh by the Israelis that same day—saw Hook outside the UN compound before he was shot. He was waving a large UN flag to the Israeli soldiers, who responded over a loudspeaker, “We don’t care if you are the United Nations or who you are. F*** off and go home!”

Maurice Frankel, director of the Campaign for Freedom of Information, told the BBC that he was surprised that the Blair government had refused to release any information on Hook’s killing. “[The] request is for information on the death. You would assume that they have information about what has been established themselves, which is not in confidence, which could be disclosed, given that there is a very substantial public interest.”

The government, however, is concerned above all for its ties to Israel. Its stance is indicative of the nature of the Labour government’s relationship with the Zionist state. The Sharon government is a criminal regime; any state that wishes to cultivate its ties to Israel is obliged to ignore its crimes—even when these are perpetrated against that state’s own nationals.



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