

Israel carries out deliberate massacre in Gaza

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Israel's November 8 massacre of 19 civilians at Beit Hanun in Gaza has sparked angry protests throughout the Palestinian territories and within Israel itself.

The government of Ehud Olmert has insisted that the shelling by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) was an accident due to technical error, and Israeli military officials said the artillery was aimed at a target about 500 metres away.

This claim is not credible. The incident follows an offensive by the IDF that has claimed 53 lives in Beit Hanun over the last few days, supposedly aimed at ending Qassam rocket-fire across the Gaza border into southern Israel. This in turn follows on from Israel's major "Operation Summer Rains" offensive, mounted on the pretext of rescuing Corporal Gilad Shalit.

The Israeli soldier was captured near Gaza by Palestinian militants on June 25, in revenge for an Israeli attack that was strikingly similar in both method and intent to that mounted on Beit Hanun. The June 9 shelling of a Gaza beach that led to the deaths of eight people—including seven members of the same family, of which three were children—deliberately inaugurated a military campaign to destroy the economic, social and political infrastructure of Gaza that continues to this day. It is an offensive that is bound up with Olmert's aim of establishing a Greater Israel through the permanent annexation of much of the West Bank and East Jerusalem and that also motivated the war waged by Israel against Lebanon in July and August.

Since the end of June, more than 450 Palestinians had been killed in the Gaza strip. The latest attack on Beit Hanun has served the essential political purpose of paving the way for a further stepping up of Israeli military aggression, ending any possibility of resuming efforts towards a negotiated settlement and making discussions on a unity government between Fateh and Hamas increasingly difficult.

Eyewitness accounts paint a terrible picture of human

suffering that claimed the lives of 18 members of the Al-Athamna family. The 19 dead is the highest Palestinian civilian toll in a single incident since the second Intifada began in September 2000.

All the family members had only just returned home after the pull-out of Israeli troops the previous day. That night, between 12 and 15 shells hit the neighbourhood in a 15-minute barrage. Many were killed as they fled their homes in panic. Eight children and seven women were among the dead. At least seven houses in Beit Hanun were hit and at least 40 people were wounded, all civilians.

One witness told reporters, "It is the saddest scene and images I have ever seen. I saw people coming out of a house covered in blood. I started screaming to wake up the neighbors."

A boy of 14, who was wounded, said, "We were asleep and we were awakened by shells hitting the house of my uncle next door. Then the windows to our houses were blasted away. We fled the house only to be hunted outside. The shells killed my mother and sister and wounded all my siblings."

Akram Al-Athamna, a family member, said he had seen "smoke coming out of the house of my uncle Saad." Later, "Projectiles were fired directly onto the people who were rushing out of the house. There was blood everywhere. I saw my neighbor, Sakher Adwan; he went to get his sister, and he was killed."

Rahwi Hamad said, "I opened my window and I looked out and I saw a shell hit a neighbor's house.... When I came out, another shell had hit the house. There was a stench of blood and (burned) flesh."

Surviving relatives sat weeping in front of the buildings. According to one report, a man dipped his fingers in a puddle of blood and daubed it on his face. "God avenge us, God avenge us," he cried. Firefighters had hosed the blood off buildings and cobblestones, while ambulance crews gathered body parts from

nearby streets and gardens.

Later that day, the head of Hamas's Qassam rocket unit, Ahmed Ouad, was killed along with another Hamas militant in an Israeli Air Force strike in the southern Gaza Strip. Ouad is the son-in-law of Palestinian Foreign Minister Mahmoud Zahar of Hamas. Another two Hamas militants were killed and four others wounded in northern Gaza. And five Palestinians, including four Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade commanders, were killed in the West Bank.

The Olmert government and the IDF would have both predicted and counted on the angry response of the Palestinians.

On Wednesday, several violent incidents were reported in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In East Jerusalem, three days of mourning closed down businesses and schools, and protests were mounted involving hundreds. Some 200 Palestinian schoolgirls held a spontaneous protest at the Temple Mount and were fired on with stun grenades by riot police.

On Thursday, tens of thousands attended the funeral of the victims. Their coffins were draped in the yellow Fateh flag. About 20 gunmen fired sporadically into the air. Abdel al-Hakim Awad, a Fatah spokesman, warned, "The residents of Sderot, the residents of Ashkelon, even the residents of Tel Aviv, are not going to enjoy security or peace as long as you are suffering, our beloved people in Beit Hanoun."

Hamas, which heads the Palestinian Authority government, denounced the attack.

Khaled Mashaal, the political leader of Hamas in exile in Syria, canceled the cease-fire with Israel in operation since February 2005. "All Palestinian groups are urged to activate resistance despite the difficult situation on the ground. Our confidence in our military wing to respond is great," he said.

Hamas's military wing also called for attacks on American targets, issuing a statement that "America is offering political, financial and logistic cover for the Zionist occupation crimes, and it is responsible for the Beit Hanoun massacre." However, Ghazi Hamad, spokesman for the Hamas-led Palestinian government, said the group had no intention of attacking American targets. He urged "the Arab nation and the governments of the Arab countries to protest the world's silence and the American bias."

Islamic Jihad said it would carry out suicide

bombings in response to Beit Hanun, and leaflets attributed to Fateh's Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades also called for the resumption of attacks in Israel.

Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas of Fateh condemned the "terrible, despicable crime" but called for restraint.

Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas had announced on Wednesday that he was freezing talks on establishing a unity government with Fateh, but later said that negotiations would resume shortly. Mustafa al-Barghouti of Fateh, who is acting as a mediator, also insisted that talks would continue despite "the bloodbath in Beit Hanun."

Aside from launching a perfunctory internal investigation by the army, Olmert has done everything he can to make sure that hostilities worsen. Olmert, speaking in English at a business conference yesterday, expressed regret for the "mistake," but insisted that Israel will continue its military operations in Gaza as long as Palestinian rocket attacks persist and that further tragedies were possible. "It may happen," he said.

Israel has responded to the humiliation it suffered in the Lebanon with a sharp shift to the right. It is offering its services to Washington as a regional proxy for mounting provocations against Iran and Syria in return for America's tacit backing for its own territorial ambitions. Olmert will meet US President Bush in Washington later this month to coordinate policies over Iran's nuclear programme.

Prior to the IDF's latest offensive in Gaza, Olmert brought Avigdor Lieberman of the far-right Yisrael Beiteinu into his coalition government, appointing him as deputy prime minister and "Minister for the Strategic Threat" with a specific remit on Iran. At a meeting to "complete preparations and training for an extensive action" in Gaza, Lieberman said that Israel should do "as the Russians do in Chechnya."



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