

Commandos raid the Rachel Corrie as

Further evidence emerges of Israel's criminal attack on Gaza aid flotilla

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7 June 2010

Israeli naval commandos stormed the Irish-owned Rachel Corrie aid vessel on Saturday, detaining its eight crew and eleven activists from the Cyprus-based Free Gaza Movement, including Irish Nobel Peace laureate Mairead Maguire, former United Nations assistant secretary general Denis Halliday, and Malaysian parliamentarian Mohd Nizar bin Zakaria.

The illegal raid was conducted in international waters, beyond even Israel's self-declared "maritime exclusion zone" off Gaza. Designed to maintain the blockade of Gaza in the aftermath of the May 31 massacre of nine Turkish activists, the operation was another demonstration of the Israeli government's utter contempt for international law and global public opinion.

The Rachel Corrie, named after the young American student killed in Gaza in 2003 while trying to prevent a Palestinian home being bulldozed, was carrying 1,200 tonnes of aid, including wheelchairs, medical supplies and cement. The vessel was to have joined last week's flotilla, but was delayed by technical problems. Crew members and activists made their journey despite the Israeli killings of their counterparts aboard the Mavi Marmara, and in defiance of an attempted deal negotiated between the Israeli and Irish governments to have the cargo unloaded in Israel.

Israeli forces reportedly jammed the ship's radio and communication signals before boarding from several small boats. Activists and crew offered no resistance to the unlawful seizure of their vessel, with *Haaretz* reporting that they assisted the raid by lowering a ledge from their ship for the commandos to enter.

Haaretz said several of the soldiers involved had taken part in the previous raids on the Mavi Marmara and other flotilla ships. This underscores the provocative character of the Israeli government's actions. More killings were entirely possible given these circumstances; violence was averted only because the Rachel Corrie crew decided to acquiesce to the naval takeover. The vessel was steered to the Israeli port of Ashdod. Activists and crew were detained and questioned, but have begun to be released and deported from Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued an extraordinary statement after the interception, arguing that the fact that commandos did not shoot those on the Rachel Corrie proved that they had acted legitimately aboard the Mavi Marmara. He declared: "We saw today the difference between a ship of peace activists, with whom we don't agree but respect their right to a different opinion from ours, and a ship of hate organised by violent Turkish terror extremists."

Israeli claims that its troops acted in self-defence on board the Mavi Marmara are refuted not only by eye-witness testimony, but by the results of the autopsies carried out by the Turkish Council of Forensic Medicine for the Ministry of Justice. According to the *Guardian*, which obtained a copy of the results, the nine men who were killed were shot a total of 30 times. Five were killed by gunshots to the head.

Fulkan Dogan, a 19-year-old US citizen, was shot five times from less than 45 centimetres—in the face, back of the head, twice in the leg and once in the back. Ibrahim Bilgen, a 60-year-old man, was shot four times—in the temple, chest, hip and back. Two others were shot four times and five of the victims were shot either in the back of the head or in the back.

That the victims were shot in the back and head indicates that the Israelis were carrying out a shoot-to-kill policy. It undercuts Netanyahu's insistence that the soldiers were facing a lynch mob.

Dr Haluk Ince, the chairman of the Council of Forensic Medicine in Istanbul, said only one man had been killed with a single shot—to the forehead and from a distance. Everyone else had received multiple gun shots that had been fired directly and from close by—the nearest from a distance of 20 centimetres.

All but one of the bullets came from 9mm rounds. The other came from a previously unknown variety. "It was just a container including many types of pellets usually used in shot guns. It penetrated the head region in the temple and we found it intact in the brain," Dr Ince said.

Witnesses confirmed the intensity of the shootings. Ismail Patel, the chairman of the pro-Palestinian group Friends of Al-Aqsa, told the *Guardian* that the Israelis were shooting to kill, as indicated by the fact that the people who died had been shot in the upper part of their bodies. He calculated that during the bloodiest part of the assault, the commandos were shooting one person every minute. He said he saw one man shot in the back of the head just two feet in front of him, and another shot once between the eyes.

Patel said, "These deaths were avoidable and I lay the blame squarely with the Israelis." He and another witness, Alex Harrison, said the troops opened fire from the helicopter above the Mavi Marmara with live ammunition and without any warning.

Harrison, who was in the smaller Challenger yacht, crewed largely by women, said that the Israelis used rubber bullets, sound bombs and tasers

against them.

Henning Mankell, the Swedish prize-winning writer aboard the cargo ship *Sophia*, with 24 others, wrote, “A man is shot. I am seeing it happen.” He continued: “The soldiers are impatient with us. Someone who is going too slowly immediately gets a stun device fired into his arm. He falls. Another man who is not moving fast enough is shot with a rubber bullet.”

Once in Israel, Mankell wrote, “Beside me, a man refuses to have his finger prints taken. He resists and is beaten to the ground. They drag him off. I don’t know where. What word can I use? Loathsome? Inhuman?”

Mankell stated that he, along with others on his ship, were robbed of their money, credit cards, clothes, MP3 players and laptops.

Jamal Elshayyal, a British-born *al-Jazeera* producer, told the *Independent*, “It was at 11pm local time on the evening of the 30th, as we were headed for Gaza, that we first spotted the Israeli military from afar. I asked the organisers what they expected to happen. They told me they had decided to move as far away from the military zone as possible, and as far away from the Israeli army and as deep into international waters, because they wanted to avoid a confrontation.

“At 2.30am I sent an email to my news desk to say we shouldn't expect anything to happen during the coming hours, and I went to bed. At roughly 4am, a huge bang on the window woke me up. I could see swarms of people in small speedboats belonging to the Israeli army close to our boat. The sound was of water grenades and tear gas canisters landing on board. I quickly put on my life jacket, grabbed my satellite phone and ran upstairs. Most of the others chose to stay down.

“Because many of the crew were at that time at morning prayers, there had been a quick approach from all sides just before they had finished praying.

“When I got to the top deck I could see there were more than 15 speedboats around us, which had on average about 20 soldiers each. About 12 feet above me, maybe 15 feet at most, I saw the bottom of a helicopter; the sound was immense....

“There was a second helicopter hovering over the ship, trying to lower Israeli soldiers down on a rope. On either side there was tear gas being thrown in from the boats, canisters which they were firing from a sort of gun. One man was shot in the top of the head from the helicopter. He collapsed on the ground. I snatched a microphone from one of the Turkish reporters to say one man had been killed. As I did that another man was shot. Those people died instantly.

“Until that point I had not yet seen an Israeli soldier on deck. As far as I am concerned, it's a lie to say they only started shooting on deck. Only then did I see an Israeli soldier on deck.

“The men who were dead had been fired on from above.”

The *Independent* writes: “Only as eyewitnesses, traumatised by their experiences, started to return to their home countries were serious questions raised about the veracity of the Israeli version of events... At least two other eyewitnesses saw soldiers firing from above the ships before they landed on the Marmara's deck.”

The newspaper continues: “At some point early on, the activists dragged

three, possibly four injured soldiers to a lower deck, either to keep as hostages or for their own safety. It was then, several passengers say, that the situation quickly deteriorated. Israel has insisted that the protesters took two of the soldiers' pistols and used them, but others claim the pistols were taken away to prove that Israel planned to use live rounds.

“Below, the protesters rummaged through captured soldiers' belongings and claimed to unearth a document that they allege is a list of people Israel intended to assassinate. The booklet, written in Hebrew and in English, contained some photographs of passengers on the Marmara, including the leader of IHH, the Turkish charity that provided two of the ships, an 88-year-old priest, and Ra'ad Salah, head of the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, Mr. Elshayyal said.”

According to Patel, 48 other people were suffering from gunshot wounds and six people were still missing. This raises urgent questions. How is it possible that six people are still unaccounted for nearly one week after the raid? If they are in hospitals, why have their names, their whereabouts and injuries not been released and their families informed? If they are dead, where are their bodies?

Israel’s allegations about the aid convoys are a tissue of lies.

Israel claims that the activists on board the Mavi Marmara were terrorists bent on carrying weapons to Hamas, despite their having been checked by the Irish, Greek and Turkish authorities. Not only did the activists have no weapons with which to confront the Israeli commandos—in a few cases they improvised, using iron bars and kitchen knives in self-defence against armed soldiers—but no weapons have been found in the cargo bound for Gaza.

Israel called the main Turkish group organising the flotilla, the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), a violent terrorist group. IHH leaders have denied having any links to terrorist organisations or extremist groups. An Islamic charity, formed in 1994, IHH provides shelter, clothing, food and aid in conflict or natural disaster zones. IHH is presently involved in humanitarian aid projects in over 120 countries, including Ethiopia, Haiti, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Palestine, and has won recognition for its work.

IHH has had Special Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 2004. It is also affiliated with the Organisation of the Islamic Conference to the United Nations, the Council of International Organisations for Relief in Iraq, and the Union of NGOs of the Islamic World.

Following Israel’s raid on the Mavi Marmara, Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Daniel Ayalon said, “the [IHH] organizers are well known for their ties to global Jihad, Al-Qaeda and Hamas. They have a history of arms smuggling and deadly terror... The organizers' intent was violent, their method was violent, and, unfortunately, the results were violent.”

Israel's Shin Bet security service claims IHH is a major player in raising funds for Hamas. But IHH is not on the US State Department's list of 45 groups defined as terrorist organisations, and the department has stated that Israel’s claims of links between IHH and Al Qaeda “can't be validated”.

Israel makes its false claims in order to justify an act of piracy against a Turkish ship in international waters.

According to the Turkish newspaper *Zaman*, the Istanbul Bakirkoy

Prosecutor's Office has opened an investigation into Israel's raid. Prosecutors are weighing numerous possible charges, including murder, injury, hostage-taking, attacking Turkish citizens on the open seas and piracy, with Netanyahu, Defence Minister Ehud Barak, and Israel Defence Forces Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi as the prime suspects. They are taking witnesses' statements and intend to use the autopsy reports as evidence.

Navi Pillay, the UN's high commissioner for human rights, said Israel could face prosecution for its raid on the Mavi Marmara and she was following the numerous requests from around the world for a referral to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. She said she believed that Israel's blockade of Gaza violated international law, but that even if it was legal, Israel had an obligation to allow humanitarian aid to be brought into Gaza.



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