

Israeli troops again target peaceful protests with live ammunition and tear gas

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The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) fired live ammunition and tear gas on unarmed Palestinians protesting for the third Friday in a row near Gaza's border with Israel.

At least 528 protesters were injured, 59 by gunshots and many others by tear gas, 107 of whom were hospitalized. At least one is in a critical condition. Ten of the wounded are nurses and paramedics in Khan Younis, while two are journalists.

This week's unarmed protest, called "Flag Day," has seen demonstrators burn Israeli flags and wave Palestinian ones.

Without providing a shred of evidence, Israel has accused Hamas, which governs Gaza, of using the protests as a cover for carrying out attacks on the border.

Sections of the Israeli media called yesterday's protest "Molotov Day"—and claimed that the Palestinians were planning to throw improvised incendiary devices (IEDs) towards Israeli forces—in an attempt brand the demonstrations as violent and justify Israel's criminal response.

The IDF has killed 34 Palestinians, including 26 demonstrators, since the start of the March of Return just over two weeks ago. Yet not a single Israeli has been killed or even injured, and no Israeli property has been damaged or put at risk. Furthermore, the shooting of unarmed civilians constitutes a violation not only of Israel's own standing orders, but of international humanitarian law.

The six-week peaceful protest is demanding the Palestinians' right to return to their ancestors' villages and towns in what is now Israel—a demand that Israeli officials reject because it would reduce Jewish citizens to a minority.

The March is also calling for the full implementation

of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 of December 1948 stipulating that "the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date."

The six-week campaign will conclude on May 15, the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the state of Israel, which the Palestinians commemorate as Nakba (Catastrophe Day). The US is set to open its embassy in Jerusalem on that day. The Palestinians claim East Jerusalem as the capital of a future state.

Yesterday's casualties follow Israel Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman's earlier pledge of a "reaction of the harshest kind" and his warning that Israel's open-fire rules for the Gaza border—a shoot-to-kill policy—would remain in place and that anyone approaching the border was endangering their life.

Last Sunday, Lieberman said there were "no innocent people" in the Gaza Strip—which is controlled by the militant bourgeois-Islamist group Hamas. He said, "Everyone's connected to Hamas, everyone gets a salary from Hamas, and all the activists trying to challenge us and breach the border are Hamas military wing activists."

Among the 26 demonstrators killed by Israel's military forces was the well-known Palestinian video-journalist Yasser Murtaja. The 30-year-old father, who worked for Ein Media, had been covering all the protests at the border fence. He was shot in the abdomen by an Israeli sniper Friday, April 7, while wearing a flak vest clearly marked "Press" and holding his Canon 5D camera.

Ten journalists have been injured by live ammunition, with a further 18 injured by tear gas canisters since the beginning of the March of Return protests on March 30, in a blatant attempt to prevent the real story of

Israel's murderous suppression of the Palestinian protests emerging. Israel refuses to recognize Palestinian journalists as professionals or distinguish between demonstrators and photographers, while issuing press cards to Israeli and international journalists.

Lieberman sought to defend the IDF's cold-blooded murder of Murtaja by claiming he was operating a drone—an assertion even Israel's military has denied. Undeterred, he claimed, without providing a shred of evidence, that Murtaja was a member of Hamas, even though the latter had previously arrested and beaten him for carrying out his work.

An unlikely source contradicted Lieberman. A US State Department official said that the US Agency for International Development (USAID) had recently vetted and approved an \$11,700 grant to Ein Media. This would not have been possible if the organization were linked in any way to Hamas, which the US and Israel proscribe as a "terrorist" group.

Murtaja's killing has been widely condemned by Israeli and international media organisations. Israel's Union of Journalists wrote to IDF Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Gadi Eizenkot, protesting the killing and calling on the IDF to uphold the freedom of the press.

The General Federation of Arab Journalists is to include Murtaja's killing in a prosecution it is launching against Israel at the International Criminal Court (ICC).

After initially refusing, the authorities announced on April 7 they would investigate Murtaja's death. But this is unlikely to produce anything other than a whitewash.

The protests have seen some 2,870 people injured between March 30 and April 11. So great has been the scale of the casualties that the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has expressed its concern. It has questioned Gaza's capacity to handle thousands of wounded in the light of the 12-year blockade of Gaza by Israel and latterly by Egypt.

OCHA said, "Gaza's health sector has struggled to cope with the mass influx of casualties, due to years of blockade, internal divide and a chronic energy crisis, which have left essential services in Gaza barely able to function." It added, "The large number of casualties

among unarmed demonstrators, including a high percentage of demonstrators hit by live ammunition, has raised concerns about excessive use of force."

Israel has aggravated the suffering of the Palestinians, refusing the injured permission to leave the Gaza Strip for treatment in Egypt or elsewhere, leaving two young Palestinians in danger of losing their legs. Israel has all but admitted to denying medical treatment as a form of punishment, in a response to a court petition on behalf of the injured.

According to *Ha'aretz*, Israel had refused requests for an exit permit for those injured despite their medical conditions meeting all the necessary criteria. "The main consideration for the refusal stems from the fact that their medical condition is a function of their participation in the disturbances."

The human rights group Adalah, which had petitioned the Israeli government on behalf of the Palestinians, said, "The wilful act of denying urgent medical care, in these circumstances, may constitute cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and/or torture under the UN Convention Against Torture, ratified by Israel."

Within Israel, this onslaught has not gone unopposed. There was a small but significant protest in Sderot—the city most affected by the homemade rockets fired from Gaza—denouncing the IDF's actions there and calling for an end to the Israeli military blockade of Gaza.

In the West Bank, where the Palestinian Authority's security forces act as subcontractors for the Israeli army, demonstrations in solidarity with Gaza have been few and small.

In the wider Arab region, the March of Return is getting short shrift from the state and corporate-controlled media allied with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. They are determined to secure US intervention against the Assad regime in Syria as part of a broader offensive against Iran. The protests are receiving only slightly more coverage on Al Jazeera, which is controlled by Qatar, supports Hamas in Gaza and is closer to Iran.



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