This week in history: April 12-18

11 April 2021

25 years ago: Israel kills Lebanese civilians in Qana Massacre

On April 18, 1996, over 100 Lebanese civilians were killed after Israel shelled the United Nations compound in Qana. The shelling, known as the Qana Massacre, was part of a broader attack, Operation Grapes of Wrath, launched against Lebanon by Israel, ostensibly in retaliation for previous terrorist attacks.

Operation Grapes of Wrath, the 16-day bombardment of southern Lebanon, claimed the lives of over 160 people. Up to 500,000 Lebanese civilians were displaced due to damage from the conflict. It underscored the essentially murderous character of the "peace process" initiated in September 1993 with the US-brokered accord between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Far from heralding a period of peace and prosperity, the so-called peace pact intensified the scramble for economic and political control of the region. The struggle involved the major powers (most notably the United States and France); local capitalist regimes in Israel, Lebanon and Syria; and the bourgeois national movements including Hezbollah and the PLO.

Hezbollah's rockets against civilian targets in Israel were launched at Syria's behest. The regime of Hafez Assad used these attacks to pressure Washington and Tel Aviv into accommodating the interests of Damascus in the Middle East settlement. The Israeli state, backed by Washington, responded with massive violence directed at crushing popular resistance to its occupation and forcing Syria and Iran to cut off support for Hezbollah.

Definite economic interests underlay the US-Israeli assault. Israel had no desire to see Lebanon's revival as a rival banking and commercial center in the Middle East. Both Tel Aviv and Washington viewed with concern the increasing French political and economic involvement in Lebanon. The Israeli blitzkrieg served to wreak hundreds of millions of dollars in damage to Lebanon's basic infrastructure and at the same time reassert US and Israeli hegemony in the region.

The bombing was only halted because it began to backfire on the government of Shimon Peres, particularly after the slaughter of more than 100 refugees at Qana. Peres's hope of boosting his government's chances in the upcoming May elections also slumped as the operation failed to halt Hezbollah's attacks.

The assault exposed the dead end of nationalism in the Middle East. At the height of the Israeli carnage, the PLO leadership of Yasser Arafat solidarized itself with the Peres government, and voted overwhelmingly to remove clauses in the movement's charter calling for the destruction of Israel. Peres reciprocated with a vote by the Israeli Labour Party in favor of the establishment of a Palestinian state.

50 years ago: Bangladesh forms provisional government

On April 17, 1971, the cabinet members of a Bangladesh provisional government were sworn in at a meeting in the town of Mujibnagar (then known as Baidyanathtala). The formation of the government solidified earlier declarations of independence (in what had been East Pakistan) by leaders of the liberal bourgeois Awami League, and set off the heaviest fighting of the Bangladesh war for independence.

The provisional government was led by members of the Awami League who had been elected to the Pakistan Parliament in the December 1970 general elections, but had been refused seats by Yahya Khan's presidential dictatorship in West Pakistan. In March 1971, Khan began a wave of terror in Bangladesh, arresting and assassinating those suspected of supporting independence. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the Awami League and nominal president of the provisional government, was arrested and held until the conclusion of the war.

Shortly after its formation, the provisional government moved to Kolkata, India where it would conduct the war in exile under the effective control of the Indian government of Indira Gandhi. India provided large supplies of arms and training for the Mukti Bahini militias. It was clear that a direct war between India and Pakistan loomed.

The events in Bangladesh carried both immense dangers and potential for the working masses of the subcontinent—revolution or fratricidal war. The outcome depended on the elaboration of the independent political position of the working class. This entailed common political action by all the oppressed layers of the subcontinent—West Pakistan, India, East Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Ceylon)—in struggle for a workers and peasants government. This position, put forward by the Revolutionary Communist League of Sri Lanka, and its leader Keerthi Balasuriya, was opposed by every political tendency in the subcontinent, as well as by what was then the leading section of the world Trotskyist movement, the Socialist Labor League in Britain, which offered "critical support" to India in the struggle.

Balasuriya wrote to the SLL, "It is not possible to support the national liberation struggle of the Bengali people and the voluntary unification of India on socialist foundations without opposing the Indo-Pakistan War. Without opposing the war from within India and Pakistan it is completely absurd to talk about a unified

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socialist India which alone can safeguard the right of self-determination of the many nations in the Indian subcontinent."

The Indian Congress government recognized this immense threat to their class rule and readily came to the aid of the Bangladeshi factions that could be relied on to both fight against Pakistan and suppress the strivings of the masses in Bangladesh.

75 years ago: US-Soviet arms race escalates

This week in April 1946 authorities in the US and the Soviet Union took steps in an arms race escalated by the first stages of the Cold War. While the US carried out its first successful launches of a long-range guided ballistic missile, the Soviets established a secret facility aimed at developing nuclear weapons.

The US missile tests, which began on April 16, involved V-2 rockets, captured from Nazi Germany at the conclusion of World War II. They were conducted at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico, which had been established in July 1945 for post-war military testing and weapons development.

The V-2, developed by the Nazis in 1944, was powered by a liquid-propellant rocket engine and able to carry a 1,000-kilogram payload. While only a limited number were used by Germany in the latter stages of the war, the missile was highly effective and deadly. It travelled at supersonic speed, defeating existing detection and anti-missile capabilities and striking without audible warning.

Germany's defeat in May 1945 touched off a race between the Allied powers, especially the Americans and the Soviets, for control of the Nazi weapon. The Soviets gained control of some of the V-2 manufacturing facilities and prepared to transfer them to Russian territory.

The US military acquired 300 railcar loads of V-2 parts and materials, which were shipped to New Mexico and driven to the White Sands testing facility. The Americans also captured 126 of the German designers of the weapon. Wernher von Braun, the leading figure in the development of Nazi rocket technology, and a number of his colleagues were brought to the US, where they were given immunity for past crimes and put to work on V-2 development.

On April 13, the All-Russian Scientific Research Institute of Experimental Physics, codenamed Arzamas-16, was established in the town of Sarov, several hundred kilometers from Moscow. The new body, founded as the result of a decree by the Soviet Union's Council of Ministers the week before, was tasked with developing an atomic weapon. Some six months later, the first nuclear reactor would be established in Moscow.

Soviet weapons experts had examined the feasibility of developing a nuclear weapon during World War II. Their limited efforts gave way to an urgent program to develop atomic devices after the US dropped nuclear bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the conclusion of the global conflict, in August 1945. In addition to terrorizing the Japanese population, those attacks were aimed at sending a menacing warning to the Soviet Union and the rest of the world.

100 years ago: US-Japanese conflict over Pacific Islands

On April 18, 1921, United States Secretary of State Charles Hughes release diplomatic correspondence from the previous few months that showed intensifying conflict between Japan and the US over the Yap Islands, today a part of the Federated States of Micronesia in the western Pacific, south of Guam and east of the Philippines.

After the Unites States defeated Spain in the Spanish-American war and occupied the Philippines in 1898, Spain had sold the Yap Islands to Germany. At the outset of the First World War, Japanese imperialism, fighting on the side of the Allies, occupied the islands, which were a communications hub for underseas cable. In 1919 the Treaty of Versailles, which was not signed by the US, endorsed the Japanese occupation with its South Seas Mandate.

The conflict surfaced publicly on April 7 when Hughes released a letter to the Allied powers, which included France, Britain, Italy and Japan, that demanded equal access to former German colonies. By the next week, the United States was receiving verbal support from France and more ambiguous support from the British.

The correspondence released on April 18 revealed that Japan regarded the issue as a "question of grave concern," and that the League of Nations had granted a colonial mandate to Japan for all the territory in the Pacific north of the equator. Hughes in his correspondence insisted, according to the *New York Times*, that "the [Allied] powers could not yield Yap to Japan without the approval of this country."

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