

The Qana massacre: Slaughter of innocents in Lebanon

Statement of the Editorial Board
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The Israeli massacre of Lebanese civilians, mainly children, in the village of Qana is a colossal war crime for which the United States government bears full responsibility.

The repeated missile strikes, launched in the dead of night while the targeted victims were asleep, reduced a four-story apartment building and nearby houses to rubble, killing at least 57 residents, including 37 children.

Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora called the Qana bombing a “heinous crime” committed by “Israeli war criminals.” Speaking in English, so as to make clear his message was addressed to the Bush administration, Siniora scotched a planned visit by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, saying he would not hold talks with her until a ceasefire had been called.

For millions of people around the world, the atrocity captured the essence of the US-backed war on Lebanon, epitomizing its brutality and inhumanity. While the broad mass of humanity reacted with horror at the tragic loss of innocent life, and outrage toward the governments of the United States and Israel, the official response from Washington was utterly banal and callous.

There were the standard expressions of “regret” and “sadness,” as though such empty phrases legitimized the policy that produced this latest crime and the countless others that preceded it.

President Bush reiterated the American mantra of a “sustainable peace” in the Middle East—a euphemism for giving Israel more time to destroy all resistance within Lebanon to American and Israeli domination. With the bodies of 37 Lebanese children, killed by US-supplied missiles and fired by Washington’s war ally, yet to be buried, Bush spoke of his “hope for peace for boys and girls everywhere... especially in the Middle East.”

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told a Jerusalem press conference that she was “deeply saddened” by the “terrible loss of life” and reiterated US “concern” over Israeli attacks on civilian targets.

She then said, “We are pushing for an urgent end to the current hostilities, but the views of the parties on how to achieve this are different.” The first part of that sentence was an obvious lie, and the second omitted the fact that the chief international actor whose “different views” are blocking a ceasefire is the United States.

Other US spokesmen offered cold-blooded apologies for Israel’s action. Undersecretary of State Nicolas Burns declared that Hezbollah “located its military forces among civilians” and repeated the canard that Hezbollah had provoked Israel’s massive assault by carrying out a border raid and capturing two Israeli

soldiers on July 12.

As always after such atrocities, Israeli officials blamed their victims. Prime Minister Olmert declared, “The village and its surrounding areas were a source for launching hundreds of rockets.”

Dan Gillerman, the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, charged that Hezbollah was responsible for the killings in Qana because it “used women and children as human shields.” He suggested that the Lebanese government and the Lebanese people were harboring Hezbollah and therefore reaping what they had sowed.

The “human shield” claim is the standard justification given by every imperialist military when it attacks civilian targets. In this case, it is an all-purpose excuse for continuing to bomb Lebanon’s Shiite population, which overwhelmingly supports Hezbollah—a mass political party with delegates in the Lebanese parliament and ministers in the current government.

Various Israeli spokesmen repeated the official line that Israel had dropped leaflets warning residents to evacuate towns and villages in south Lebanon—as if that relieved Israel of responsibility for dropping bombs and firing precision missiles on their homes! In any event, as is well known, Israel has destroyed roads and bridges to make flight nearly impossible, and bombed civilian convoys that were attempting to flee to the north.

If anything, the official responses from the United States and Israel to the massacre placed in sharper relief the chasm that separates them from the vast bulk of humanity.

The tide of international revulsion was so great that Washington felt obliged to pressure Israel to accept a 48-hour suspension of its air war in southern Lebanon. Nervous lest the opposition to the US-Israeli war spin out of control, the Bush administration decided it needed to make a gesture so as to buy time and review its joint war strategy with Israel.

US State Department official Adam Ereli announced Sunday night that Israel had agreed to the suspension, ostensibly to allow for an investigation into the Qana attack. Ereli added, however, that Israel had the right to “take action against targets preparing attacks against it,” a qualification that gives Israel ample license to continue its attacks on Lebanese civilian populations.

News reports cited Israeli authorities who insisted that the suspension was limited to attacks from the air on southern Lebanon only, was not a ceasefire, and did not apply to artillery attacks or assaults by Israeli ground forces.

Far from being an aberration or accident, the Qana massacre was a deliberate act of mass murder. It underscored that the target of the war is not only Hezbollah, but the entire Lebanese people. Its aim, worked out well in advance by the Bush administration and the Israeli government, is to destroy the infrastructure of the country and reduce most of its territory south of Beirut to

rubble.

With Washington's full and open support, Israel is determined to inflict sufficient death and destruction to drive the entire civilian population out of south Lebanon and make the region uninhabitable for years to come.

This is the fascistic strategy behind the rhetoric of President Bush, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert about establishing Israeli "security" and Lebanese "sovereignty." It is why Rice, speaking in Jerusalem even as the bodies were being dragged from the smoking ruins in Qana, continued to reject the Lebanese government's desperate calls for a ceasefire.

Washington and Jerusalem wish to continue the bloodbath, and escalate it, until the carnage has reached a sufficient level to reduce the entire country to the status of a US-Israeli protectorate. For the American ruling elite—including both parties of US imperialism—this criminal enterprise is only a means to an end: the removal of the Syrian and Iranian regimes, by means of diplomatic and economic blackmail, subversion, and war.

The ultimate aim is to transform the Middle East and Central Asia, with their vast deposits of oil and natural gas, into a virtual colony of US imperialism, with Israel serving as Washington's junior partner and military attack dog.

The Israeli strike on helpless civilians—most of whom had made their way to Qana to seek refuge from the indiscriminate bombing of Tyre and other nearby towns—was not only brutal, it was utterly cowardly. It came one day after Israel withdrew its forces from the Hezbollah stronghold of Bint Jbeil, where vastly outgunned Hezbollah fighters shocked the Israeli Defense Forces with their fierce and courageous resistance, forcing the Israeli military to retreat. The Israeli response was to escalate its killing of unarmed civilians.

That the destruction of homes in Qana was part of a deliberate strategy is clear both from Israel's words and deeds. Only last Tuesday Israel destroyed a UN monitoring post in south Lebanon in order to force the withdrawal of UN observers from the area. And late last week, a member of Israel's security cabinet was quoted as saying, "We should raze the villages in south Lebanon if needed. The Israeli army is a long way from having won, and we have to change the rules of the game..."

The British *Observer* newspaper carried a story on Sunday outlining the evidence of systematic violations by Israel of international laws of war. The newspaper suggested that the purpose of this policy was to depopulate the south of Lebanon.

The *Observer* wrote: "As Lebanese medical staff reported that an Israeli air strike had killed a woman and her six children in a house in the southern village of Nmeiriya, western diplomats in Beirut admitted they were 'baffled' by Israel's targeting policy. Ambulances, refugee columns and civilian homes, infrastructure and UN posts that have all been hit—and evidence has begun to emerge that civilians may have suffered phosphorus burns.

"Footage has also emerged of the increasingly widespread use of cluster munitions in areas with civilian inhabitants. Concern has been further heightened by the delivery to Israel by the US of at least 100 GBU-28 'bunker-buster' bombs containing depleted uranium warheads for use against targets in Lebanon....

"Regarding reports that Israel was intentionally trying to depopulate a large swathe of territory in the south, Mair [Lucy Mair, a field researcher from the American-based Human Rights Watch] said: 'It's hard for us to speak about this. But given there is such a massive displacement, it's difficult to imagine a situation where the population can come back.'"

The massacre of civilians is nothing new for the Israeli ruling elite. Ten years ago, during the last major Israeli incursion into Lebanon, Israeli artillery destroyed a United Nations base in the very same village as this weekend's atrocity—Qana. More than 100 civilians who had taken refuge in the base were killed.

Such methods have been the stock in trade of the Zionist state from its foundation. Violence and terror against civilians have been repeatedly used to drive Arabs from their villages, farms and homes in order to increase the territory held by Israel. Following the November, 1947 United Nations General Assembly vote to partition Palestine, the Israeli political leadership and its military carried out a number of massacres of Palestinian villages in order to expel the inhabitants and expand Israeli territory beyond the borders laid down by the UN.

Within a short period, some 700,000 Palestinians had been turned into stateless refugees, and Israeli policy has ever since been grounded on a determination to prevent their return, while further extending Israel's borders.

Far from seeking to rein in its chief ally in the Middle East, the American ruling elite under the Bush administration has concluded that its aggressive appetites in the region can be used to further Washington's own imperialist designs for global domination. The main author of crimes such as Sunday's massacre in Qana is US imperialism.

All of those involved in this barbaric act are war criminals who must be brought to justice. That is the task of the international working class.

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