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Item 7. Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories

The Children Killed in an Invasion the World Did Nothing About

"To sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men."

Abraham Lincoln

One child's death alone is an outrage: does a word exist in any language for when a third of all those killed in the invasion of an eighteen month besieged territory, are children? The enormity of this barbarity: the attack on an essentially a defenseless population. It started on December 27, in what can only be described a free reign of terror. In the words used by Bill Moyers "*Israel did exactly what terrorists do, it spilled the blood that turns the wheel of retribution*". It set to motion only hatred and violence, leaving behind death and more ruined lives- is this the road to the peace they say they seek.

After Israel 's ground assault started on Gaza on January 4th, around 40% of the 1,330 deaths recorded were of women and children under 18, as well as around half of the 4,250 grossly injured. More than half of the population of Gaza is children, aging from infancy to 14. The humanitarian crisis faced by these children where 400 have been killed (brain scans, as reported, have made it very clear that a number of these children had been shot at close range) and another 1,500 have been wounded. This is beyond what can be termed deplorable and nothing less than a massacre.

More than 400 children dead within the first few weeks of 2009! Where were the front page media stories during those weeks about the carnage of these children? Where were the international outrage of nations and the condemnation of Israel? The Israelis imposed a press blackout: the world media was not allowed in- for whose protection – tell us once again?! The killing of innocent women and children cannot remain hidden for long. According to statistics provided by UNICEF, over 800,000 children have been exposed to extraordinary levels of violence and insecurity since the beginning of the conflict.

In Gaza there is a civilian population literally trapped in a war zone with no way out and nowhere to escape from the killing; the majority of these trapped 1.5 million civilians in Gaza are children. They are caged, starved, in desperation and in agony; those still alive in distress and misery! "*The crisis in Gaza is singular in that children and their families have nowhere to escape, no refuge. The very thought of being trapped in a closed area is disturbing for adults in peace times. What then goes through the mind of a child who is trapped in such relentless violence?*" (UNICEF Director: Ann M. Veneman). Gaza is a blockaded strip 12 km at its widest and 41 km long. There was nowhere to flee from Israel's might and fury, not even the sea.

Israel has poured phosphorous bombs over these children too, brazenly and flagrantly violating the Fourth Geneva Convention; nor was it the first time HRW has documented Israel using this kind of prohibited

weapon against Gaza's civilian population. Israel, however insists, that its use of white phosphorus shells during this three-week campaign in Gaza was not illegal. Tragically, seldom has it been so apparent that innocent children have been so completely unprotected when bombs fall. The use of white phosphorus and other incendiary weapons is covered in one protocol of a 1980 international treaty, the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, which bans making civilians “*the object of attack*” by such arms. According to the International Herald Tribune over 200 of these phosphorus shells were used! When these shells explode in the air, they disperse pieces of felt soaked in phosphorus— each containing more than 100! Let us call it what it is— callous, purposeful disregard for life!

Israel is also accused by the Red Cross of failing to help wounded people in an area of Gaza where their own rescuers found four small children cuddled to their dead mothers, too weak to stand up. The Israeli military “*failed to meet its obligation under international humanitarian law to care for and evacuate the wounded*”, said ICRC. Israel made no effort to allow civilians to escape the fighting.

According to experts, despite its denials, Israel has remained in total occupation of the Gaza Strip since 2005. A single government or international expert body has yet to declare an end to the Israeli occupation of Gaza, largely because Israel insists on retaining full control of the air and the sea. As the occupier state, Israel is under legal compulsion to protect civilians, so it is in violation of international law on at least three counts: targeting civilians through bombing of civil institutions such as schools, religious centers... Launching missiles into dense population areas and using inordinate and excessive force. This Israeli policy of “collective punishment”; its wanton destruction and “disproportionate military force” are in breach of international law. The world must now decide whether their actions could ever possibly be attempted to be justified under the rules of war.

This recent heinous assault on Gaza by land, sea and air viewed against the backdrop of its total control over the region since 1967 is a glaring violation of Palestinians' human rights. More than 4,000 buildings have been destroyed in Gaza, and more than 20,000 severely damaged. 50,000 are homeless and 400,000 without running water. Gaza has been in these past few weeks, as [Gideon Levy](#) a Haaretz Correspondent described: “**war deluxe.**” *Compared with previous wars, it is child's play - pilots bombing unimpeded as if on practice runs, tank and artillery soldiers shelling houses and civilians from their armored vehicles, combat engineering troops destroying entire streets in their ominous protected vehicles without facing serious opposition. A large, broad army is fighting against a helpless population and a weak, ragged organization that has fled the conflict zones and is barely putting up a fight.*”

It remains unfathomable to any humane mind why nothing was done to safeguard the children of Gaza. There is no doubt that there has been a criminal disregard for innocent children's lives. And that Israel has willfully imposed a literal living hell upon the lives of these Palestinian children, with its systematic destruction. Those children, who do somehow manage to survive after all is said and done, will have lost their childhood innocence. It is criminal that 50,000 children in Gaza are malnourished, more than 2/3 children suffer from Vitamin A deficiency, nearly 1/2 of children under age two are anemic, they lack access to medical supplies, food and far too many have diarrhea because of the polluted water supply. Children in Gaza are today facing health epidemics, the World Health Organization has warned. Polio, measles and hepatitis are threatening trapped Palestinian children because doctors had to stop vaccinating them. WHO was in the midst of a mass vaccination program when the bombing began on December 27th. Now, inevitably as an added result a health crisis will likely explode.

Three-quarters of children in hot areas already suffered from anxiety and nightmares; many from flashbacks of past violent events and according to research by the Gaza Community Centre for Mental Health, before the

latest Israeli accomplishments: 55 per cent of children already had acute post-traumatic stress disorder, severe terror and traumas. Psychologists say Israel's three-week offensive inflicted even more severe trauma than previous conflicts in Gaza because civilians in the crowded territory had no safe place to run. The innocent world of Palestinian childhood purity has been stained with blood too often, forced to face the criminal horrors of war, disease, and growing up to the harsh realities of hate. The emotional and psychological effects of these all too recent events on an entire generation of children will be beyond severe. Stop and ask yourself: what would it be like to lose a child of my own?

Anwar Balousha in the Jabaliya refugee camp lost five of his children due to the cruel and continuous Israeli military attack. Sabah Abu Halima lost not one but four of her children plus her husband and is also suffering from terrible phosphorous burns; there are so many other Palestinians just like them! These are not characters in a play - they are living, breathing human beings like you and me, they too had dreams, hopes and aspirations for their children, just like us, but they are dead now.

Falk, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on human rights in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip observed: *"the mental anguish of the civilians who suffered the assault is so great that the entire population of Gaza could be seen as casualties. To lock people into a war zone is something that evokes the worst kind of international memories of the Warsaw Ghetto, and sieges that occur unintentionally during a period of wartime"*. He was referring to the starvation and murder of Warsaw's Jews by Nazi Germany in World War Two (Reuters). Whole neighborhoods have disappeared, shelled into oblivion, and all landmarks obliterated to such an extent that even the local people cannot find their bearings! How can any one of us react indifferently to such abuses? I do not know about you, but I for one, would like to know what Israel thinks it has accomplished by this senseless slaughter of a people already oppressed and blockaded by them, 80 percent of whom already relied on UN food aid and were in desperate need and agonizing suffering.

Uri Avnery writes in his essay that Israel's latest assault has *"seared into the consciousness of the world (as it should) will be the image of Israel as a bloodstained monster, ready at any moment to commit war crimes and not prepared to abide by any moral restraints."* Are the people of Gaza not God's people too? Are the children of Gaza not our children too? As Queen Rania Al Abdullah stated recently, what is it we can say: *"To the mothers watching their children cry in pain, huddle in fear, and deal with more trauma than any of us will experience in an entire lifetime? That they are collateral damage? That their lives don't matter? That their deaths don't count? That the children of Gaza do not have the right to life, liberty and security?"* The blood of Gaza's children is on all our hands, it is the world's collective responsibility.

Israelis should be taken before the International Criminal Court, yet neither Israel, nor the U.S.A. is party to the treaty that created it. There are however European countries, signatories to a Geneva Convention that permits their courts to arrest and prosecute individuals accused of committing war crimes in other countries. Punishment for these perpetrations must be demanded on an international scale- the world must not ignore what has transpired. What has happened in Gaza this month, in such a densely populated area, would be comparable to casualties, had it happened here in the USA, of 221,000 dead and more than one million wounded (statistics: Green Valley News and Sun). Is it now, more reprehensible? International pressure must be made to bare weight and force: war crimes punished. Justice demands no less, there must be accountability and reckoning.

No more children- should ever, in Gaza or anywhere, have to live without their mothers and no more mothers- ever, anywhere again- have to be told that they too, have lost their children to such atrocities.

Karen Francis

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