

Atrocities in Gaza: Piecing Together the Story

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As Europe calls for a ceasefire, Israel is accused of cruel tactics and use of deadly white phosphorous in its blood-soaked assault on Gaza.

A week ago, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak announced that “Operation Cast Lead,” as the current bombing of Gaza has been dubbed, [“will continue until all its goals are met.”](#)

Whatever those goals are, exactly, they are clearly incomplete; Barak told Israel’s Army Radio, the strikes would intensify “as much as needed to meet the goals we set for ourselves, to bring quiet to the south.”

Over a week after the start of this blood-soaked chapter in the Israel/Palestine saga, there is no quiet but the silence of the dead — over 530, and counting. On Sunday, Israeli ground troops entered Gaza, escalating the violence. “At least 75 Palestinians have been killed since Saturday,” the AFP [reported](#) on Monday, “when Israel upped a weeklong bombardment of Hamas targets in Gaza by pouring in ground troops into the densely populated territory.”

More recently, it has been reported in the UK Times Online that the Israel Defense Forces is [using white phosphorus in its attacks](#), a controversial substance that can cause excruciating burns, but nevertheless is not illegal if it is only used as a smokescreen. Banned by the Geneva conventions, white phosphorus has been used by the U.S. military in Iraq:

“...[T]he tell-tale shells could be seen spreading tentacles of thick white smoke to cover the troops’ advance. “These explosions are fantastic looking, and produce a great deal of smoke that blinds the enemy so that our forces can move in,” said one Israeli security expert. Burning blobs of phosphorus would cause severe injuries to anyone caught beneath them and force would-be snipers or operators of remote-controlled booby traps to take cover. Israel admitted using white phosphorus during its 2006 war with Lebanon.”

After a week of doing pretty much nothing, Western leaders have started to respond to the crisis, with French President Nicolas Sarkozy and (otherwise MIA) Middle East special envoy Tony Blair arriving in the region on Monday.

“We in Europe want a cease-fire as quickly as possible,” Sarkozy [said](#). “... The guns must fall silent, there must be a humanitarian truce. Everyone must understand that what is at stake here is not just an issue of Israel and Palestinians, it is a global issue, and it is the whole world which will help you find a solution.”

Israeli officials continue to deny that there is a humanitarian crisis in Gaza. “There is no

humanitarian crisis in the Strip, and therefore there is no need for a humanitarian truce,” Israeli Foreign Minister [Tzipi Livni said](#) during a visit to Paris on New Year’s Day.

Reports out of Gaza prove otherwise. As of Sunday, local hospitals were relying on generators for electricity. “The U.N. has warned that power networks were down in large parts of the Gaza Strip on 4 January, with hospitals relying on generators,” reported the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. “Without power for pumps, 70 percent of Gazans are estimated to be without tap water.”

According to IRIN:

Israel has been blocking fuel supplies, and stocks are dwindling, the latest (Jan. 4) report by the U.N.’s humanitarian coordinator in the occupied Palestinian territories said.

The Israeli Gisha organization, a nongovernmental organization, said seven of the 12 electricity lines in the enclave (the 12 lines normally supply about 70 percent of Gaza’s electricity) were down and warned that the lack of power was causing sewage to flood into populated areas and farmland. There continued to be a risk of sustained flooding.

“The water and sewage system in Gaza is collapsing, cutting people off from the water supply and causing sewage to flood the streets,” said Maher al-Najjar, deputy director of Gaza’s water utility, CMWU. He also said 48 of Gaza’s 130 wells were not working at all due to lack of electricity and damage to pipes. “At least 45 other wells are operating only partially and will shut down within days without additional supplies of fuel and electricity,” al-Najjar said.

The question of whether there is a humanitarian crisis was further debated on Democracy Now on Monday morning, in a [heated debate](#) between Christopher Gunness of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency — called in from Gaza, where he works to provide aid to some 750,000 refugees — and Meagan Buren, a spokeswoman for the Israel Project in Washington.

Host Amy Goodman also interviewed Phyllis Bennis from the Institute for Policy Studies, who described the happenings over the weekend at the United Nations:

Bennis: ... As we’ve seen so many times before, we have an instance of the United States preventing the Security Council from taking any action in the crisis in Gaza, whether it would be an actual move to impose a cease-fire, but they even went further than that to prevent even a statement from being issued, the sort of the lowest level of response from the Security Council. The U.N. diplomats essentially said exactly what Condoleezza Rice said two years ago at the time of the Israeli attack on Lebanon, when she went before the council and said, “We don’t want a cease-fire yet,” essentially telling the world, there is not enough dead people yet. We want more dead people before we will call for a cease-fire. And that has been the consistent position of the Bush administration, including President Bush himself on his weekly radio address, and it was the same position taken this weekend.

Also on the program was Sameh A. Habeeb, a Palestinian journalist who has a blog,

gazatoday.blogspot.com. Habeeb described the dividing of Gaza by the Israeli military:

... Gaza yesterday was being cut into two pieces. The north of Gaza and Gaza City are being cut from the south and the middle areas of the Gaza Strip. No one is allowed to go out or in ...

In the area where I live, in the east of Gaza, the artillery shelling is still taking place. And a few minutes ago, around three shells landed in my area. And one guy was killed, and two were injured in hitting two houses. And this was one family.

Meanwhile, Israel's [ban on foreign reporters from Gaza](#) is raising protest. "Israel has never restricted media access like this before, and it should be ashamed," said Ethan Bronner, the New York Times bureau chief in Jerusalem. "It's betraying the principles by which it claims to live."

Not that the corporate U.S. media has been particularly balanced in its reporting to begin with. Over at the Huffington Post, Max Blumenthal [examines](#) the coverage since the start of the raids:

Almost as soon as the first Israeli missile struck the Gaza Strip, a veteran cheering squad suited up to support the home team. "Israel is so scrupulous about civilian life," Charles Krauthammer claimed in the Washington Post. Echoing Krauthammer, Alan Dershowitz called the Israeli attack on Gaza, "Perfectly 'Proportionate.'" And in the New York Times, Israeli historian Benny Morris described his country's airstrikes as "highly efficient."

Despite this, Blumenthal notes that Americans don't seem to be showing the same lockstep support of Israel as the media is:

"So what accounts for the surprising trend in American opinion on Gaza? The proliferation of progressive online media and social networking sites could be a factor, but I have another theory: The same pundits who are cheerleading Israel's assault on Gaza once sold the occupation of Iraq to America, and with a nearly identical set of arguments."

Meanwhile, Barack Obama has been [coming under fire for his silence](#) on the Gaza attacks. Chris Hedges [recently wrote](#), the president-elect's "only comment on the one-sided slaughter under way in Gaza was: 'If my daughters were living in a house that was being threatened by rocket attacks, I would do whatever it takes to end that situation.' "

If self-defense applies to Israel, why doesn't it apply to the Rayan family? — while still-President George W. Bush seems hardly capable of mustering the energy to sound sincere about his hopes for a cease-fire (which he calls a "noble ambition"). "I understand Israel's desire to protect itself," Bush said Monday. "The situation now taking place in Gaza was caused by Hamas."

At the same time, the media is littered with accounts of family members desperately worrying about their loved ones in Gaza (if you know where to look), from Laila al-Arian [writing about her grandfather](#) in the Nation to Sousan Hammad's ["Phoning Home to Gaza"](#) in Counterpunch. Fares Akram, a correspondent for the Independent [lost his father](#)

[last week.](#)

Of course, not all the victims fall under the category of innocent civilians. Over at Truthdig, Hedges [writes about the death of a Palestinian](#) who made no apologies for his support of suicide bombs.

“I often visited Nizar Rayan, who was killed Thursday in a targeted assassination by Israel, at his house in the Jabaliya refugee camp when I was in Gaza. The house is now rubble. It was hit by two missiles fired by Israeli F-16 fighter jets. Rayan, who would meet me in his book-lined study, was decapitated in the blast. His body was thrown into the street by the explosions. His four wives and 11 children also were killed.

Rayan supported tactics, including suicide bombings, which are morally repugnant. His hatred of Israel ran deep. His fundamentalist brand of Islam was distasteful. But as he and I were students of theology, our discussions frequently veered off into the nature of belief, Islam, the Quran, the Bible and the religious life. He was a serious, thoughtful man who had suffered deeply under the occupation and dedicated his life to resistance. He could have fled his home and gone underground with other Hamas leaders. Knowing him, I suspect he could not leave his children.

Many have pointed out the layers of hypocrisy that have surfaced in this conflict. As well as a mosque (reportedly hiding Hamas rockets), among the more shocking targets of Israel's attacks was the Islamic University of Gaza, which was bombed last week, to the condemnation of virtually no one, a least not in U.S. academic circles. As Neve Gordon and Jeff Halper [point out](#):

“Not one of the nearly 450 presidents of American colleges and universities who prominently denounced an effort by British academics to boycott Israeli universities in September 2007 have raised his or her voice in opposition to Israel's bombardment of the Islamic University of Gaza earlier this week. Lee C. Bollinger, president of Columbia University, who organized the petition, has been silent, as have his co-signatories from Princeton, Northwestern and Cornell universities and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Most others who signed similar petitions, like the 11,000 professors from nearly 1,000 universities around the world, have also refrained from expressing their outrage at Israel's attack on the leading university in Gaza. The artfully named Scholars for Peace in the Middle East, which organized the latter appeal, has said nothing about the assault.”

As many others are pointing out, Israel's actions are violently shortsighted when it comes to the lasting effects. As Robert Dreyfuss writes for the Nation:

“The outcome of Israel's action is likely to be to strengthen, not weaken, Hamas. It will also have the following collateral effects: it will undermine the moderate wing of the Palestinian movement, perhaps fatally. It will weaken the government of Egypt, boosting the power of the radical-right Muslim Brotherhood there to the point where Egypt's regime could collapse, with incalculable consequences. It will boost radicalism across the region, especially its Islamist variant, in Lebanon and Iraq in particular, and help Iran gain traction among otherwise-unreceptive Arab populations.

Hamas is unlikely to seek a deal now. Having watched Israel blunder into Lebanon two years ago in a futile effort to eradicate Hezbollah, only to see that movement emerge victorious and take control of part of Lebanon's government, Hamas is not going to sue for peace.

...Israel's objectives aren't clear. Israeli hawks, including Benjamin Netanyahu — appearing Sunday on CNN's "Late Edition" — insist that Israel cannot stop its action until Hamas is utterly defeated, whatever that means.

Despite Israel's intractability, Western diplomats are reportedly seeking a "four-point agenda":

- Stopping arms smuggling into Gaza
- Financial support for Egypt in controlling the border and detecting tunnels
- International monitoring, with the United Nations, European Union and Arab forces assisting Egypt
- Reopening of all crossing points into the Gaza Strip — a key Hamas demand

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