

Sharon Paves the Way For Expelling Palestinians

by Dean Andromidas

On May 25 the Israeli Military announced the official end of Operation Rainbow, its latest brutal assault on the impoverished Gaza Strip. The army left a wake of massive devastation; dozens of Palestinians, including women and children, were killed, and over a hundred houses were totally destroyed or badly damaged. Within hours of this announcement, Israeli tanks rumbled into another part of Gaza, where they killed two Palestinians and demolished yet another three homes.

These brutal operations were enough to outrage Israeli Justice Minister Yosef Lapid, who told a meeting of Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's cabinet: "The demolition of houses in Rafah must stop. It is not humane, not Jewish, and causes us grave damage in the world." Lapid, who is a Holocaust survivor, declared "I saw on television an old woman picking through the rubble of her house in Rafah, looking for her medicine, and she reminded me of my grandmother, who was expelled from her home during the Holocaust."

Lapid, the leader of the centrist Shinui party, went on to say, "I was in the United States last week, and I noticed that we look like monsters to the rest of the world. . . At the end of the day, they'll kick us out of the United Nations, try those responsible in the international court in the Hague, and no one will want to speak with us."

This display of death and destruction has been, and continues to be, carried out while Sharon promotes his so-called "disengagement plan," whereby he is promoting a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza as well as from a few Jewish settlements on the West Bank. It is becoming more and more obvious that this "disengagement plan" is the smokescreen behind which he is continuing a brutal policy of repression and the destruction of the Palestinian population. The ultimate purpose of the plan is to buy time until the opportunity arises for Sharon and his generals to launch a new regional war that would "transfer" the Palestinian population out of the "Land of Israel." Operation Rainbow, where every color is blood red, had no military or security purpose except to escalate and broaden Sharon's brutality into larger areas of the Gaza Strip.

Death and Destruction in Rafah

The official death toll in the one-week operation was no less than 42 Palestinians killed, including women and children, while hundreds were wounded. The Israeli military



Israel's Justice Minister Tommy Lapid accused the Israeli Defense Forces of having a plan to destroy 3,000 Palestinian houses in Rafah in the Gaza Strip, as here in the Al-Brazil neighborhood. "This is monstrous," Lapid said. It is part of Ariel Sharon's firm intention for decades, to force the Palestinians out of Gaza and the West Bank, using "war crises" to do it.

admits to destroying 45 buildings and badly damaging another 56 in the last week alone, rendering 575 people homeless.

Nonetheless over the last month, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency reported that the Israelis destroyed no less than 155 buildings in the Gaza town of Rafah. This has left 1,960 people homeless. The United Nations also reports that in the last month alone, 128 Palestinians were killed, mostly innocent civilians. This compares with 19 Israelis, of whom 13 were soldiers. On May 18, Amnesty International (AI) released a report documenting how Israel had destroyed 3,000 homes since the intifada began in September 2002. They also documented that in 2004, Israel had killed over 600 Palestinians, 100 of whom were children. They charged that Israel had killed 90 people in assassinations of Palestinian militants, 50 of whom were bystanders. AI also reported that 200 Israelis were killed, including 21 children, and 70 soldiers.

The human tragedy goes beyond the impact of these dry figures. Included among the "terrorists" who were killed

were: Asma Al Mughayr, 16, and her brother Ahmed, 13, who were killed when they went on to the roof of their house to hang laundry; and on the last day of the operation a three-year-old Palestinian girl was shot dead. The dead were put two to a box at the mortuaries, and the children's corpses were put in a refrigerated room used for storing vegetables, because the 24-hour 6-day curfew imposed by the Israeli military made it impossible for the Palestinians to bury the dead. When residents were finally able to venture out of their homes, they were met by scenes of devastation. Huge Israeli tanks and armored personnel carriers had turned paved roads into rubble. Dozens of houses had been demolished by the massive Israeli armored bulldozers, and countless others were severely damaged by the huge tanks that traversed the narrow roads, or by the effects of artillery shells and heavy machine guns. The electricity and water infrastructure was extremely badly damaged, if not destroyed.

But the devastation started weeks and months earlier following the announcement of Sharon's so-called Disengagement Plan. While the official mission of Operation Rainbow was ostensibly to destroy tunnels used for smuggling weapons through the Egyptian border and to destroy the "terrorist infrastructure"—to use the Israeli Defense Forces euphemism—it was clearly aimed at strengthening Israel's hold on the Gaza Strip.

The fact that this operation was more than one of the typical incursions into Gaza that have been going on over the last three years, was confirmed by Israeli Justice Minister Lapid, who was quoted in the Israel daily *Ma'ariv* on May 27, accusing the military of having had a plan to destroy no less than 3,000 homes in Rafah, and having approached the Israeli Attorney General to see if they could legally get away with it. Lapid said, "That's monstrous, in my opinion." He went on to say that the "Chief of Staff told the government that we'd only destroy a few houses, and he lied." The Israel Attorney General did not approve of such a plan, warning that it would be an obvious war crime.

According to Israeli press reports, the areas of operation—the Al Brazil and Tel Al Sultan neighborhoods of the border town of Rafah—were not strongholds for the militants. Nor were they close to the border where the tunnels are located. They are in fact two of the more quiet sectors, and this is why they were targeted. The neighborhood Tel Al Sultan borders the southeast corner of the Gush Katif Israeli settlement block, a settlement that stretches from the Egyptian border, occupying about one third of the Gaza coast line. In fact, Tel Al Sultan is almost an enclave, in that Gush Katif surrounds it on two sides, while the Egyptian border lies on its third side. It appears obvious that the operation is aimed at making life so miserable in this enclave that Palestinians will begin moving out, thus enabling the settlement to expand eastwards.

Within hours after Operation Rainbow ended, the Israeli military launched attacks and house demolitions in Deir El

Balah, which lies opposite the northern border of the Gush Katif settlement block. The move appears not only to strengthen the northern flank of Gush Katif, but serves to cut the tiny Gaza strip in half.

The other part of Rafah which was attacked during Operation Rainbow, was the Al Brazil neighborhood, which again is not known as a militant stronghold, but does lie very close to an Israeli military base, as well as the new, but closed, Gaza airport. All these moves only serve to strengthen the Israeli hold on the Gaza Strip, while pushing the Palestinian population into smaller and smaller enclaves. This has been Sharon's plan for the last three years. On the West Bank, through his "Berlin Wall of the Middle East," he has further cantonized the area, slowly pushing most of the Palestinian population into three enclaves encircling the three largest West Bank cities, Nablus, Ramallah and Hebron.

Israel Peace Camp Mobilizes

The hard core of the Israeli Peace camp mobilized themselves throughout Operation Rainbow under the slogan "None of us can sit at home at a time like this. None of us can say, 'we did not know,' " an obvious allusion to those in Nazi Germany who claimed they "did not know" that the holocaust was occurring.

Spirited demonstrations were held for three days in front of the Israeli Defence Ministry in Tel Aviv. Organized by Peace Now, other participants included the Refuseniks, the Yahad party as well as its youth movement, and other organizations. Yahad Chairman Yossi Beilin addressed the demo calling for an immediate withdrawal from Gaza.

Other demonstrations took place at one of the crossings between Gaza and Israel. 700 people attended, including 12 busloads of activists. The demo was sponsored by Gush Shalom, Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, Ha-Kampus Lo Shotek, Yesh Gvul, The Refusenik Pilots, The Refusenik's Parents Forum, Women's Coalition for Just Peace, and Ta'ayush Arab Jewish Partnership. The protesters plan to have a non-stop presence at the "Gate to Rafah," also known as the Sufa checkpoint.

Nonetheless, the massive demonstration that brought 150,000 people into Rabin Square on May 15th did not repeat itself, primarily because too much of the political opposition, especially the Labor Party, under the equivocating leadership of its chairman Shimon Peres, was busy considering how to relate to Sharon's phoney disengagement plan, instead of how to bring down his right-wing extremist government.

Sharon continues to be backed by his primary supporters in Washington, Vice President Dick Cheney and the neo-cons in the Bush Administration. As American Presidential candidate Lyndon H. LaRouche has said many times, Sharon is their "hand grenade," which they will throw if they think blowing up the rest of West Asia, west of Iraq, will enable them to stay in power. As long as these lunatics are in power, Sharon will be also.