

Amid talk of cease-fire, eyewitness accounts describe Israel's destruction of Gaza

By Julie Hyland
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"Armageddon" is the word used by *Times* of London correspondent Martin Fletcher, the first eyewitness from the British news media to see the devastation wrought by Israel in Gaza.

Twenty days after the Israeli military unleashed its firepower on the narrow strip of land containing 1.5 million people—more than half of them children—there is "no one left in the ruins to hear the thunder of Israel's guns," Fletcher wrote.

The *Times* correspondent was one of only a handful of journalists allowed into Gaza under tight Israeli supervision on Thursday, and even then only to the outskirts—the edge of the town of al-Atara.

Fletcher described houses and apartment blocks "mostly reduced to their shells" by the constant bombardment, commercial units "crushed" and vegetable fields "churned up by tanks and bulldozers."

"There is not a Palestinian to be seen," Fletcher wrote.

The *Times* supports Israel, but the open savagery it has displayed in Gaza, with the deliberate targeting of civilian areas and reports of summary executions, caused the newspaper to question the repercussions of Tel Aviv's actions for the long-term stability of the Middle East and Israel itself.

A BBC producer in Gaza, Hamada Abuqammar, said that Israeli air strikes had continued even during the supposed three-hour humanitarian ceasefires. Medics reported Friday that they had managed to pull a further 23 bodies from rubble in Gaza City, amid reports of "ferocious fighting" in residential areas.

With at least 1,133 Palestinians killed, including 355 children, and another 5,130 wounded, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) are now said to be in the centre of Gaza City in what a military spokesman said could be "the final act."

Some 40,000 people have fled to United Nations buildings for sanctuary—25,000 in the last week alone. But UN buildings are themselves targets for the IDF. Following last week's attack on a UN-run school that killed more than 40 people, the central UN headquarters holding humanitarian supplies was hit Thursday, destroying thousands of tonnes of food and supplies urgently required.

The blood-letting went on even as UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, on a "mediation tour" of the Middle East, expressed his "outrage" at the attack on the UN building.

An emergency session of the United Nations General Assembly late Thursday evening, requested by 118 non-aligned member

states, also criticized Israel's offensive. The Israeli delegation had sought to prevent the session on procedural grounds, with Gabriela Shalev, the Israeli ambassador to the UN, dismissing it as a "cynical, hateful and politicised [attempt] to de-legitimize Israel's fundamental right to defend its citizens." But the session proceeded, with General Assembly President Miguel D'Escoto Brockmann accusing Israel of violating international law and stating that Gaza "has been turned into a burning hell."

As Brockmann spoke there was mounting evidence to confirm reports that Israel is using white phosphorus as a smokescreen for the incursions by its tanks and troops into residential areas. Phosphorus, which is illegal under Geneva Treaty of 1980 in built-up areas, causes terrible burns.

Abu Shaaban, director of the burns unit at Gaza's Shifa hospital, told Christian Aid that the situation was a "disaster."

"We have been receiving a very high number of patients with a strange burn," he said, "completely different to the burns we are used to managing, very deep burns with a very offensive, chemical odour coming from the wound site..."

"In some cases there is then severe destruction of the tissue and we have had to amputate whole limbs."

During the emergency UN session, Brockmann rebuked UN member-states for failing "to take the necessary steps to impose an immediate cease-fire," stating, "[The UN] cannot continue to fiddle while Gaza burns."

But the UN is not simply sitting on the fence in the one-sided conflict. While distancing itself from Israel's worst atrocities, the major Western powers are working towards a conclusion that will leave the Palestinians in even more wretched conditions.

Writing in the *Independent* Friday, Alvaro de Soto, chief UN Middle East peace envoy from 2005-2007, reported that on December 16 the UN Security Council had adopted resolution 1850, reaffirming its support for the "agreements and negotiations resulting from the 2007 Middle East summit in Annapolis, Maryland."

The Annapolis agreement was supposedly an initiative by the US to help the "peace process" and establish a Palestinian state by 2009.

But as the *World Socialist Web Site* reported at the time, the Palestinian state envisaged is little more than a Western protectorate that could "be imposed on the Palestinians only through a military and political offensive involving the United States, Israel, the European powers and the Arab bourgeois

regimes, particularly Egypt."

The agreement specifically ruled Hamas, which had won the majority of seats in the January 2006 elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council, out of any settlement. Israel had insisted there could be no reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas and that any "national unity" government was out of the question. With Washington's backing, Israel made a clear warning that "Abbas must wage all-out civil war against opposition to Israel. If Abbas can't or won't do it, then Israel will," the WSWS explained.

Despite its best efforts, Fatah is considered to have done too little, too late, while its alliance with the Zionist state has seen it even further isolated amongst the Palestinian masses. Twelve days after the UN adopted resolution 1850, the Israeli bombardment began.

Interviewed in *Newsweek* on January 10, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni explained, "[W]e have a situation in which... Hamas is getting stronger, while Abu Mazen [Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas] is getting weaker." Rejecting talk of a cease-fire for implying that Hamas could be a legitimate participant in negotiations, Livni said that agreement was possible only with those who accept Israel's "vision."

"The only way to continue the peace process is not only by continuing the dialogue with their [the Palestinians'] pragmatic leadership, but also by weakening those who are not willing to live in peace in this region. This is the strategy," she said.

In the same magazine, Daniel Klaidman explained that Israel's "strikes [on Gaza] were not simply a reaction; they were a calculation." The ultimate aim, he continued, was "to crush Hamas altogether, first by aerial attacks and then with a grinding artillery and infantry assault. The hope, however faint, is eventually to allow Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah government to reassert control in Gaza."

The *Jerusalem Post* reported that Fatah and the IDF are currently imposing an "Iron Fist" policy in the West Bank, to extinguish Hamas and any other oppositional forces.

The operation is "being carried out in coordination with the IDF and under the supervision of US security experts," the *Post* said. In addition to bans on oppositional activity at universities and schools, "[T]he IDF has also been helping the PA security forces by arresting dozens of Hamas men in the West Bank," it continued.

The article added, "In Bethlehem, Hebron and Ramallah, policemen beat a number of Palestinian reporters and photographers who were covering protests against the IDF operation. Other journalists have been receiving threats almost on a daily basis from the PA security forces in the West Bank."

Palestinian Authority policemen "responsible for the massive crackdown received special training in Jordan and the West Bank as part of a security plan engineered by the US," the newspaper said.

On Friday, it was reported that a teenager had been killed during clashes between demonstrators and Israeli soldiers in the West Bank town of Hebron.

Tayeb Abdel Rahim, a senior aide to Abbas, said that Hamas must be excluded from any talks on the situation in Gaza. Similarly, UN Secretary General Ban has said that "a return to the

status quo ante cannot be an option," and that the unification of Gaza and the West Bank must be "under one legitimate Palestinian authority."

Whether Hamas is sufficiently weakened to achieve this end is a calculation in on-going efforts to draw up cease-fire terms.

Reports indicate that Israel and Washington hope to have brokered a deal before US President-elect Barak Obama's inauguration on Tuesday.

Israeli negotiator Amos Gilad returned to Cairo to discuss terms of an Egyptian-sponsored "peace" deal, which Hamas agreed on Wednesday. In Washington, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Israeli Foreign Minister Livni signed an agreement "committing the United States to measures to stop Hamas re-arming itself." Israel said it will mean the US and NATO taking responsibility for monitoring shipments into Gaza.

In her *Newsweek* interview, Livni boasted that Israel's offensive was supported by the Middle East bourgeoisie.

"I don't want to embarrass anybody, but I know I represent their interests as well. It is no longer the Israeli-Palestinian or the Jewish-Arab conflict, but it is a conflict between moderates and extremists. This is the way this region is now divided."

Mass demonstrations across the Middle East in support of Gaza are increasingly turning on the Arab regimes themselves for facilitating Israel's slaughter.

In an attempt to rescue some credibility, Qatar had called for an emergency summit of the Arab League on Friday. The aim, said Qatar's emir, Shaykh Hamad Bin-Khalifah al-Thani, was not to jeopardise a truce, but to enable a unified Arab position to be formulated.

But US allies Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Iraq, Bahrain and Kuwait boycotted the meeting, leaving it without a quorum. A rival summit of the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries called by Saudi Arabia and held in Riyadh on Thursday agreed only to continue its deliberations in Kuwait on Monday, on the eve of a previously arranged Arab economic summit.

Egypt had insisted that no meeting should be held before then. It has led the way in facilitating Israel's objectives—participating in the blockade of Gaza and ensuring its borders remain closed, sealing its inhabitants into what has effectively become an open-air tomb.

Its primary concern is that nothing be done to disrupt an Israeli/US-dictated settlement. According to reports, the truce being formulated under Egyptian auspices would see the IDF remain in Gaza until a timetable for the opening of crossing points—possibly overseen by unspecified "international monitors"—is agreed.

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