

What happened in Jenin? ; Canada should push for impartial probe into battle at refugee camp

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

MORE THAN two weeks after the battle for the Jenin refugee camp first began, Israeli troops are finally allowing international observers into the area. Palestinian fighters in the camp, home to 13,000 persons, fought Israeli troops for 12 days, surrendering only last Friday.

All these incidents were carried out by Israeli troops under [Ariel Sharon]'s military or political command. As such, they resemble last week's events in the Jenin refugee camp, but differ substantially from the infamous September, 1982 massacre in Sabra and Shatila, when anywhere from 700 to 3,000 Palestinians were killed by Israel's Lebanese militia allies.

Palestinians from Jenin allege that last week, Israeli helicopter gunships repeatedly pounded the densely populated camp with missiles and cannon, and that tanks did the same with their heavy guns. They also allege prisoners were tortured and shot; civilians were buried alive by Israeli bulldozers; children were reduced to drinking sewage; and that health workers were deliberately targeted.

FULL TEXT

MORE THAN two weeks after the battle for the Jenin refugee camp first began, Israeli troops are finally allowing international observers into the area. Palestinian fighters in the camp, home to 13,000 persons, fought Israeli troops for 12 days, surrendering only last Friday.

Reports of severe human rights abuses have been seeping out from the sealed camp. Israeli spokesmen deny the allegations, saying their forces waged a clean fight.

The International Committee of the Red Cross visited the camp for the first time Monday, reporting that conditions were appalling.

Yesterday, a senior U.N. envoy said that devastation in the densely populated camp was "shocking and horrifying." Amnesty International representatives say many Palestinian corpses may be buried under piles of rubble.

As the driving force behind the newly created International Criminal Court, Canada is in a position to push for an international, impartial, and thorough investigation of the Jenin events. Meaningful peace negotiations will have a better chance of succeeding if an internationally respected team of investigators is empowered to probe contradictory Israeli and Palestinian claims.

A leading cause for concern is the personal record of the man setting Israeli policy, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. In his 50-odd years as general and politician, Sharon has co-ordinated some of Israel's most controversial military activities.

Consider, for example, one of Sharon's earliest command roles, a 1953 raid on the West Bank village of Qibya. According to Israeli historian Benny Morris, Israeli generals ordered troops to retaliate for a Palestinian terror attack by carrying out "destruction and maximum killing" in the village.

Time magazine wrote that Israeli soldiers "shot every man, woman and child they could find," and then "dynamited 42 houses, a school and a mosque," while Morris wrote that Palestinian villagers "who tried to flee their homes were gunned down in the alleyways." All told, Sharon's troops killed 60 Palestinians, including women and children.

Or consider Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, when Sharon was minister of defence. During an armoured thrust up Lebanon's coastal road, Israeli troops encountered stiff resistance in the Ein Hilwe refugee camp, responding with a prolonged artillery and air barrage.

A Jerusalem Post reporter wrote that Israeli fire transformed the camp into "two square kilometres of twisted broken rubble, putrid rubbish and torn and shattered personal belongings." Israeli forces killed some 600 persons, and, according to U.N. reports, destroyed the camp entirely.

The next chapter came shortly thereafter during Sharon's siege of West Beirut, where 20,000 Palestinian fighters were dug in among 300,000 civilians. Israeli troops began by firing on the capital's southern neighbourhoods, home to some 85,000 Palestinian refugees.

After pounding the southern neighbourhoods, Israeli gunners directed their fire elsewhere. According to a Washington Post correspondent, Israeli forces "subjected West Beirut to punishment so intensive and indiscriminate that terror was the result."

Lebanese officials say that Israel's Beirut shelling killed 5,525 persons and wounded 11,139, and the International Red Cross said 80 per cent of those were civilians.

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In Jenin, as was true for Ein Hilwe and West Beirut, Israeli forces were operating entirely on their own.

Palestinians from Jenin allege that last week, Israeli helicopter gunships repeatedly pounded the densely populated camp with missiles and cannon, and that tanks did the same with their heavy guns. They also allege prisoners were tortured and shot; civilians were buried alive by Israeli bulldozers; children were reduced to drinking sewage; and that health workers were deliberately targeted.

Israel vehemently denies these claims, saying its forces did everything possible to preserve civilian life. The Israeli army says that 23 soldiers were killed and that most of the Palestinian casualties they estimate in the dozens were gunmen who were holed up in hideouts in the camp, known as a hotbed of militant activity.

Both sides have reason to shade the truth. Palestinians want to dramatize their plight under Israeli occupation, while Israelis want sympathy for their effort against suicide bombers. An accurate picture of the Jenin events can only be established by an impartial inquiry under United Nations auspices.

As a leader in the field of international justice, Canada can play a pivotal role in launching this effort. It can push the Security Council to establish an international commission, provide initial funding for investigative operations, and even supply the field personnel.

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