

From



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Washington

Tale of a terrorised town

Palestine revisited

At 4:00 am they were preparing for the pre-dawn meal that would hold them over until nightfall. Then the border police arrived in at least 15 vehicles.

Totally unprovoked the beatings and shootings began at about 4:15 am and lasted for about an hour. Those coming out of the mosque were the first targets.

Snipers were on top of buildings. Some of those killed were shot by the police using telescopic sights. Many were beaten with guns and clubs. Everyone killed or injured was hit with live ammunition—not the rubber bullets. Some of those killed were ripped apart. All the while the police was taunting and insulting the villagers through loudspeakers. By sunrise the area looked like a war zone.

A FEW days ago, by footpath and then by donkey, I visited the site of a massacre, a pogrom, a nightmare that really happened.

The site was actually just a few miles from a very historic city; but getting there and being there seemed like travelling hundreds of miles to an inaccessible location and maybe a hundred years into a distant past.

And I was afraid too—fearful that the ever-present army might prevent me from going to see for myself as the area was still closed off from the outside world more than two weeks after the massacre occurred. And fearful that my film might be taken, or camera smashed; or even that I might be arrested.

For I was entering what is locally termed a “closed military area”—the phrase used whenever the military government in charge in this place for more than two decades decides it wants to hush something up or isolate and punish some village or refugee camp.

So where was I? No, not in some Communist country where we are used to “bad” things happening. And no, not in South Africa or Chile or Panama or some “dictatorship” of the Right or Left.

Rather I was in America’s primary ally in world affairs, yet a country which has become one of the world’s grossest violators of basic human rights for a large number of people who proudly call themselves Palestinians.

To be more precise I was just on the other side of the 1948 “Green Line” in the small Muslim village of Nahalin of some 3000 strong—minus that is the five killed in the recent massacre. This is “occupied Palestine” with flags flying proudly and defiantly and a spirit that somehow continues on.

Others had tried to come and see for themselves but nearly everyone was turned back by the army. On 25 April for instance, the French, Spanish and Greek consuls general driving in diplomatic cars

carrying their country’s flags and representing the diplomatic community posted to Israel were halted by Israeli army troops who insisted, against all arguments, that they could not go into the village.

All roads were raised high with huge boulders making them impassable. And heavily armed soldiers manned checkpoints to make sure nobody go in or out.

Such a situation, of course, made it all the more important to look for some way to find out first-hand what had actually happened. So I, and a few friends, found a way through the hills and, fortunate for us, we also found some friendly local kids with donkeys willing to take us, and this made things a bit easier and more interesting.

This is what I found out from the survivors and eye-witnesses.

Early in the morning hours of April 13 hundreds of Israeli “border police”—a kind of Israeli version of the old Brown Shirts and SS which Jews worldwide still remember with such loathing—descended on the helpless village.

For many days previously the Border Police had been harassing the villagers with insults, sexual taunts against the women, and threats that they “would be coming” one day soon.

As the *Jerusalem Post* reported on April 21 Border Police jeeps with loudspeakers came through the village in the days before the massacre with taunts such as “Come over here, Arabs. Bring out your women. We want to screw your girls. We killed Abu Jihad, and we’ll kill you.” Others would expose themselves to the villagers and a day before the massacre a specific threat was made that “we’re coming tomorrow.”

Because it was the holy month of Ramadan many of the villagers were in the mosque praying and preparing for the pre-dawn meal that would hold them over until nightfall. At about 4:00 a.m. the Border Police arrived in at least 15 vehicles and surrounded the village.

Totally unprovoked the beatings and shootings began about 4:15 a.m. and lasted for about an hour. The Border Police started by shooting and beating those who came out of the Mosque. Snipers were on the tops of buildings and some of those who were killed were apparently shot by Border Police using telescopic sights. Many others were viciously beaten with guns and clubs.

Everyone killed and injured was hit with “live” ammunition—not the “rubber bullets” the Israelis so often claim they are using. Automatic rifles as well as jeep-mounted machine guns were used as doctors reported that some of those killed were ripped apart. By sunrise the area looked like a war-zone with bodies strewn all over the central area of the village near the Mosque.

All the while the Border Police kept taunting the villagers through loud-speakers terrifying them that they had come to Nahalin to make “another Sabra and Chatilla massacre.”

By the time they had finished four villagers were dead, dozens were badly injured from bullet-wounds, dozens more were badly beaten, and the entire village was totally terrorised. A few hours later another young man was shot in the head as he returned from Bethlehem and was about to join other villagers preparing graves for the dead.

Only this fifth victim, Walid, is buried in Nahalin though a monument to all five is now being built in the village—next to the monument to the victims of a similar 1954 massacre when Israeli troops crossed over the then border with Jordan and shot to death a similar number. The other four victims are buried in a new monument being erected in the next village because the Israelis wouldn’t even allow the dead bodies to be brought back to their home for burial.

On May 5, the Israeli army announced that a number of officers were being reprimanded for what had happened at Nahalin. But this must be seen as little more than a public relations stunt—a rather typical tactic the Israelis have used over the

years as a “gesture” to sooth public opinion. For it becomes clear to anyone who takes the trouble to investigate a bit that what happened at Nahalin is part of a systematic campaign of terror specifically designed to frighten and demoralise the Palestinians and somehow quell their insistence on political independence.

If anyone doubts this conclusion the pattern of pogroms that has actually escalated since the Nahalin massacre provides the evidence.

On May 2 for instance, another pogrom took place in another small Palestinian village, this one also not far from Bethlehem. This time a much larger force of combined army and Border Police, more than a thousand with dozens of armoured personnel carriers, descended on the village of Artas.

The whole area of Artas was immediately ordered under military control and anyone who came out of their homes was beaten, arrested or shot. Teargas and debilitating chemical sprays were used and a large number of people were beaten, though there were no deaths. In Artas five homes were quickly wired with explosives and blown up, and for the next week or more the entire area was sealed with no one allowed to come or go.

Additional pogroms brought about by large number of Israeli troops have taken place just in recent days at Za’atra and Khader with a number of people killed in each case and dozens of casualties. In Bethlehem, just a few days ago, the army raided the home where a wake was in process for a 12-year-old shot to death the previous day, with one soldier coming up to one of the guests and shooting him in the head, point-blank.

And of course, throughout Gaza the situation has got worse and worse. On some days more than a hundred persons are gassed or beaten or shot badly enough to require medical treatment, and hundreds more simply fade away with their wounds unable or afraid to go for help.

Manila streets make children survive