



7 years on, nation remembers Rabin
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8 killed, dozens hurt by tank fire in Rafah

Seven of the dead were civilians, including 2 children

By Amos Harel and Arnon Regular

Ha'aretz Correspondents and Agencies

At least eight Palestinians were killed - of whom seven were civilians, including two children and two women - when IDF tanks responded to heavy fire yesterday afternoon in Rafah.

The shooting came from three armed men trying to prevent the soldiers from blocking off Palestinian tunnels on the Egyptian border that are used for smuggling. Many others were wounded in the firefight, some critically, and the troops reported that at least two of the armed men were also killed.

Palestinian sources said that the tanks fired "randomly" at houses in the area when the troops came under fire and that the dead and wounded were inside their homes, not far from the Philadelphia road that separates Rafah from Egypt. The area has been riddled with smuggling tunnels that the IDF tries to uncover and to block with walls planted into the ground. The troops yesterday were at work on such a wall when the fighting broke out. The IDF said it would continue the work today.

Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said that IDF commanders make every effort not to harm civilians and "we don't think killing children is heroism," while preliminary findings in an IDF inquiry into the event said that the afternoon incident began when the troops came under heavy rifle and

hand grenade fire, followed by an improvised anti-tank rocket fired at a bulldozer working on the tunnels. At that point, the commander of the force received an okay from his commander to fire a tank shell - apparently a flechette dart shell - at three armed men spotted about 100 meters away.

When the shooting at the troops continued, more shells were fired at a closer group of armed men. According to the IDF, the dead and wounded were in buildings behind the armed group.

According to the Palestinians, two women, aged 72 and 32, an 11-year-old boy and an 8-year-old girl were among the dead, killed when tank shells slammed into their houses. Two other fatalities were a 27-year-old man who owned a grocery store and a 45-year-old man, doctors said.

Palestinians said youths threw stones and bottles at the troops, and mourners at a nearby Palestinian funeral fired shots into the air. They said they were not aware of any rockets or grenades fired at Israeli troops. "It didn't happen," said Raouf Barbakh, one of Fatah leaders in camp, referring to the Israeli charges.

"The Palestinians are playing a dirty game," said a senior army officer. "There were dozens of armed men, firing from inside buildings, under cover of the civilian population." He said the tank fire was "relatively accurate but obviously when shooting occurs in such a crowded area, civilians can get hurt."



Palestinians carrying a child who was wounded when an Israeli shell landed in his home in the Rafah refugee camp yesterday.

Why are children dying, U.S. wants to know

Among the list of charges against Israel presented by the Americans to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's entourage in Washington was one relating to the recent killings of numerous Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip as a result of excessive fire power used by the Israel Defense Forces.

The list, which was presented prior to yesterday's incident in Rafah, does not stop there. It includes, inter alia, repeated mention of complaints regarding lengthy delays of Palestinian ambu-

lances bearing casualties and patients at IDF checkpoints.

The Americans are stressing that they have no complaints when it comes to legitimate acts of defense, or casualties in-

Focus / Ze'ev Schiff

volving individuals involved in terrorism. They are pointing their fingers at the large number of civilians, including children, who have been killed recently in both air and land-mounted IDF opera-

tions in the Strip.

Such incidents are more commonplace in Gaza due to the population density in the Strip. It is very difficult to avoid civilian casualties there, even when the assault is directed at Palestinians who are involved in terror activities. Such was the case when a one-ton bomb killed the head of the Hamas' military wing in the Strip, Salah Shehadeh, and another 13 civilians. Such was the case when fire from a helicopter gunship wounded

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IDF quietly pulls out of Jenin; surrounds city with trench

By Amos Harel

While the fighting in the Gaza Strip is becoming more intense, and the number of Palestinian casualties there is growing, the Israel Defense Forces is taking steps to reduce tensions in the West Bank. The numerous incidents in which Palestinians have been killed or injured by IDF fire in the West Bank, the vociferous international criticism, and the American expectations of Israeli gestures toward the Palestinians have all had their effect in reducing the friction between the IDF and the population.

Over the past week, the army has significantly reduced its presence inside the Palestinian towns in the West Bank and has given stricter open-fire orders to soldiers. The immediate result is far fewer civilian casualties. But these steps could also have negative effects, such as more Palestinian shootings on the roads in the territories and greater freedom for units wishing to send suicide bombers over the Green Line.

(See Hebron, page 2).

Jenin is a case in point. For three and a half months, since Operation Determined Path, there was an almost permanent IDF presence in the town. Unlike in other towns, in Jenin, the IDF did not commandeer Palestinian homes, but APCs and tanks roared through the streets daily, making their presence felt, enforcing the curfew, and backing up the infantry soldiers who were searching for wanted men and weapons. However, the armored patrols were clumsy and heavy and often fell prey to fire bombs that originated in the alleyways of the casbah and

refugee camp.

The soldiers' reactions were aggressive and more than once, civilians, including women and children, were hit. More than 10 civilians were killed in the town and many dozens were wounded. Most of the time, the IDF merely shrugged these off, saying that the mission of seeking out wanted terrorists - including those responsible for the Megiddo and Meron junctions attacks - was of prime importance.

What changed the picture was the wave of incidents two weeks ago in Nablus, Jenin and other West Bank towns. In Jenin, IDF soldiers hit five civilians in one day. Their commander, Nir, was called to give explanations to the head of the Central Command. Nir admitted that the soldiers were becoming lax about open-fire orders. "When you tell a soldier to enforce a curfew aggressively because there is a danger that a suicide bomber will try to leave the casbah for the refugee camp, he understands that he can open fire near civilians." He added: "The friction with the civilians was increasing and it was clear we would have to calm tensions if we didn't want an uprising."

For 10 days the IDF refrained from entering the town. Only yesterday did Golani troops go there for the first time, imposing a curfew for six hours. In the future, the IDF plans to take action there when it wants to seek out wanted men, and not to "demonstrate its presence."

Yesterday's action drew fire from snipers (damaging a tank severely) and a bomb was set off, but there were no

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Hezbollah trying to obtain long-range missiles

By Aluf Benn

Ha'aretz Correspondent

WASHINGTON - The Hezbollah is trying to get a ground-to-ground missile with a 300-kilometer range, that could hit anywhere in Israel north of Be'er Sheva, a senior Israeli source said yesterday in conversations with American media commentators.

The Hezbollah currently has Fajr 5 missiles that can reach Haifa and the source said that the situation on the northern border "is very dangerous."

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's conversations with administration officials included concern that the Hezbollah might exploit an American assault on Iraq to provoke Israel. According to the senior source, the Americans brought up the scenario. Sharon discussed the Lebanon issue with CIA Director George Tenet, and U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell.

The senior source said that if Israel is attacked from Lebanon, Israel's response would be "proportional."

He said that in case of such an attack, Israel would regard Syria as responsible. "We will not initiate an action against Syria and do not want war. If there is an escalation in the north, it is because the Syrians allow it," he said, adding that the American administration was cautioning Syria on this account.

President George W. Bush raised the Hezbollah issue in his press conference with Sharon, saying that the U.S. does not expect the Hezbollah "to attack our friends. That would be a terrorist action and we will fight terror everywhere. We have not changed our policy toward countries that harbor terrorists."

Couple allowed to choose baby's gender to avoid halakhic dilemma

By Tamara Traubmann and Haim Shadmi

For the first time in Israel, in a move that has set off a medical and moral controversy, the Health Ministry has given a couple permission to predetermine the gender of their child for no medical reason.

The permission was granted a few months ago to Hadassah University Hospital, Ein Karem, where the procedure is carried out by means of in-vitro fertilization and a genetic test.

"The woman is in her first month of pregnancy," said the head of the hospital's gynecology department, Prof. Neri Laufer, explaining that the couple had asked for daughter as it had run into "special circumstances" related to the fact that the family is religious and the father is a Cohen.

For the past decade, doctors have used a technique known as Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis (PGD) to determine the gender of an infant. However, till now, the procedure has been approved only in instances of genetic disorders that primarily affect males, such as hemophilia. By preventing the birth of a male child, parents could ensure the birth of a baby who would not suffer from the illness. In Israel, the technique is practiced at the Hadassah, Ichilov, Rambam and Tel Hashomer hospitals.

Now, according to numerous doctors in the field of obstetrics and gynecology, many couples are requesting to predetermine the gender of their children for

reasons other than medical ones. Prof. Daniel Zeidman, a specialist in in-vitro fertilization at Sheba Medical Center, Tel Hashomer, says that more and more couples are submitting such requests, mostly asking for male children. Laufer concurs, noting, "We are constantly receiving requests such as: 'I have four daughters - I want a son.'"

The couple treated at Hadassah are ultra-Orthodox and in their mid-20s. After marrying, they tried to start a family, but to no avail. Consultations with a fertility clinic revealed that the husband suffers from a rare disorder and has no sperm in his testicles. The doctors explained that the couple could use a sperm donation to fertilize the woman's ova.

Israeli society in general, and the ultra-Orthodox community in particular, is averse to giving birth to a child who is not one's "biological child." The case of the young ultra-Orthodox couple, however, came with another special story, stemming from the fact that the husband is a Cohen: The ultra-Orthodox parents want to keep the sperm donation a secret, but if the woman was to give birth to a male child, they would only be able to keep the matter under wraps until the boy is 13 years old. When the son of a Cohen celebrates his bar mitzvah and goes up to read from the Torah, he is heralded in synagogue as a Cohen. In the case of the young couple, however, such an announcement would be a halakhic violation,

as the boy would not be the biological son of the father, and the parents would be forced to reveal the issue of the sperm donation.

In order to avoid the dilemma, the couple decided that they wanted a female child. A daughter, they explained, would never go up to read from the Torah; the community would not know that she was not their biological child; and they wouldn't have to tell her either.

In the wake of the couple's decision, Laufer spoke with the Health Ministry's legal adviser, attorney Mira Hivner-Harel, and requested approval to apply the PGD technique despite there being no medical justification for the procedure.

Hivner-Harel approved the request, explaining that her decision stemmed from consideration for the couple's distress. "In light of the fact that we are concerned with an individual for whom the halakha and religion are his guiding principles... there was room to agree to his request," she said.

According to Hivner-Harel, "Just as there are very many ultra-Orthodox and religious individuals who prefer a sperm donation from a non-Jew when they are forced to take such a donation in the framework of fertility treatments, so I decided to meet the couple's request in this instance."

Hivner-Harel adds: "We are dealing with a family that would not have any children had we not allowed them to

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Strike seen likely to intensify

By Haim Bior

Ha'aretz Labor Correspondent

The public sector strikes are to continue next week, claimed sources at the Histadrut labor federation yesterday. The strikes will continue despite the fact that the treasury's director of wages, Yuval Rachlevsky, and the heads of organizations representing civil servants are slated to meet tomorrow night to continue discussions.

In the absence of a turnaround in the talks, the Histadrut intends to intensify its strike next week by disrupting operations at fuel stations, the oil refineries, the Postal Authority and the administrative offices of the country's universities.

Grounding planes at Ben-Gurion International Airport and bringing the rail service to a halt will be the next steps pending any progress to resolving the wage crisis.

Rachlevsky said yesterday that in talks with the secretary-general of the Civil Servants Union, Ofer Eini, he had suggested suspending the strike for a period of 30 days during which talks would be held on the structural changes at the government ministries to which the workers are opposed. The workers fear the changes will lead to the dismissal of thousands of them.

Rachlevsky said that Eini had rejected the offer.

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