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# Rubble, dust and rotting bodies everywhere

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Written by



## By Phil Reeves

Jenin - A monstrous war crime that Israel has tried to cover up for a fortnight has finally been exposed.

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Its armed forces have flattened the centre of the Jenin refugee camp, reached on Monday by the Independent Foreign Service.

A residential area the size of at least five soccer pitches has been reduced to rubble and dust. It has been flattened like a nuclear wasteland.

The sweet and ghastly reek of rotting bodies is everywhere, evidence that it is a human tomb.

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The residents, who spent days hiding in basements as the rockets pounded in, say there are hundreds of corpses entombed under a dust-field now crisscrossed with tank and bulldozer track marks.

In one half-wrecked building, gutted by fire, lay the corpse of a man covered by a rug. In another we found the remains of a man who, we were told, was buried beneath the ruins of a fire-blackened room that collapsed on him after being hit by a rocket. In a third lay five long-dead men.

A quiet, sad-looking young man led us across the wasteland, littered now with detritus of what were once households - torn clothes, shoes, tin cans, children's toys.

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He suddenly stopped. This was a mass grave, he said, pointing.

We stood and stared at a mound.

It was here, he said, that he saw Israeli soldiers pile up 30 bodies beneath a half-wrecked house. When the pile was complete, they bulldozed the building, bringing its ruins down on the bodies. They proceeded to flatten the area with a tank. We could not see the bodies; but we could smell them.

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A few days ago, we might not have believed his account. But the descriptions given by the many refugees who escaped from Jenin camp were understated - not, as many feared and Israel encouraged us to believe, exaggerations.

Their stories had not prepared me for what I saw; I believe them now.

Until two weeks ago there were several hundred tightly packed homes in this suburb. They simply no longer exist.

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Around the ruins there are many hundreds of half-wrecked homes. Much of the camp, once home to 15 000 Palestinian refugees, is falling down.

Every wall is speckled and torn with bullet holes and shrapnel, testimony of the Cobra and Apache helicopters that hovered over the camp, randomly spraying their machinegun fire.

Building after building has been torn in half, their contents spewing out into the road.

Every other building bears the giant, charred bite-mark of a helicopter missile.

On Monday night there were many families with children still living amid the ruins, cut off from humanitarian aid.

Ominously, we found no wounded.

Those who did not flee the camp or were not rounded up by the army have spent the bombardment hiding in their basements, enduring day after day of terror.

Some were forced into rooms by soldiers who smashed their way into houses through the walls.

According to the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNWRA, half of the camp's 15 000 residents were under 18. As the evening hush fell over these killing fields, we could suddenly hear the children chattering.

The mosques, once so noisy at prayer time, were utterly silent.

Wandering through this carnage, the systematic and deliberate act of savagery by a government and army that is out of control, it was impossible not to remember the lies told by Israel's government in the massive international propaganda campaign launched in the past fortnight to lessen the impact of what has now, finally, emerged.

Was it only a few days ago that Mark Sofer, an Israeli government spokesperson, was telling the audience of BBC World TV that "not one single civilian" had been targeted, and that such a suggestion was "unthinkable" to the government of Ariel Sharon?

Nor could one forget that only a few days ago, US Secretary of State Colin Powell had stood laughing next to Sharon before the world's TV cameras, calling him his "good, personal friend".

Israel was still trying to conceal these scenes on Monday. It had refused entry to ambulances of the International Committee of the Red Cross for nearly a week, in violation of the Geneva Convention.

On Monday it continued to try to keep us out.

Jenin, which lies on a plain in the northern end of the occupied West Bank, remained "a closed military zone". It was ringed by tanks, army jeep patrols and armoured personnel carriers.

Reporters caught trying to get in were escorted out of the area by the army. A day earlier the Israeli armed forces took in a few, selected journalists to see sanitised parts of the camp.

In the end, we walked across the fields, flitted through an olive grove overlooked by two Israeli tanks, and into the camp itself.

We were led in by the hands at the windows. Hidden, whispering people were waving us on through the narrow alleyways which they thought were clear. When there were soldiers about, we would see a raised warning finger, or a hand waving us back.

And there were Israeli soldiers on the ground - three scared-looking infantrymen in a doorway - and several tanks stationed by the central mosque.

Armoured personnel carriers roared through what were once alleys, but are now 30m-wide thoroughfares.

The camp did contain many militants and armed men, some of whom were responsible for attacks on Israel across the nearby 1967 Green Line, some of whom died fighting to defend their homes from a rampaging army.

The camp was the scene of the worst battles of the Intifada, in which 23 Israeli soldiers died. But this destruction, launched in the aftermath of the wicked Passover suicide bombing, was a massive act of deadly collective punishment against a civilian population.

It was about ethnic hatred and brute revenge. Not only does it fail to end the terror attacks, it guarantees that attacks by Palestinians on Israel will continue. - Independent Foreign Service

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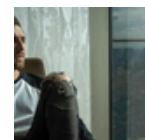
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