

‘The IDF Is Becoming A Terminator Army’

Focussed on Iraq, the world has been ignoring the mounting toll of, now, 2,200 Palestinians killed by Israeli forces since September 2000, including 429 young children and 114 women. The Israeli Defense Forces’ impassive killing on March 16 of a 23-year-old American woman, Rachel Corrie; and its accidental but brutal gunning down of two Israeli security guards in a hail of bullets on March 14, momentarily punctured the indifference to Palestinians’ losses and destruction. The verdict in Ha’aretz—“The IDF, from an army of values, is becoming a terminator”—should have sent a warning to American officers and soldiers who may become such an occupying “imperial” army in the Mideast.

Rachel Corrie and other observers from the International Solidarity Movement were reporting and protesting the wholesale demolition of Palestinians’ houses by the IDF during its military invasion of the Gaza Strip in March. She was killed in Rafah, run over by bulldozer clearing space to build a wall where the houses were being demolished.

Rachel’s parents, Craig and Cindy Corrie of Olympia, Washington, said on March 16, “We have raised all our children to appreciate the beauty of the global community and family, and are proud that Rachel was able to live her convictions. Rachel was filled with love and a sense of duty to her fellow man, wherever they lived. And, she gave her life trying to protect those that are unable to protect themselves.” The Corries released excerpts from an e-mail essay Rachel had sent to her family on Feb. 7, which follows.

I have been in Palestine for two weeks and one hour now, and I still have very few words to describe what I see. It is most difficult for me to think about what’s going on here when I sit down to write back to the United States—something about the virtual portal into luxury. I don’t know if many of the children here have ever existed without tank-shell holes in their walls and the towers of an occupying army surveying them constantly from the near horizons. I think, although I’m not entirely sure, that even the smallest of these children understand that life is not like this everywhere. An 8-year-old was shot and killed by an Israeli tank two days before I got here, and many of the children murmur his name to me, or point at the posters of him on the walls. The children also love to get me to practice my limited Arabic by asking me “Kaif Sharon?” “Kaif Bush?” and they laugh when I say “Bush Majnoon”; “Sharon Majnoon.” (How is Sharon? How is



Rachel Corrie, with bullhorn, stands with another protester in front of a bulldozer with which the Israeli Defense Forces were demolishing Palestinian houses in Rafah on March 16—minutes before the bulldozer ran over the young American woman and killed her. On March 19 the IDF, with tanks and teargas, broke up a memorial service for Corrie.

Bush? Bush is crazy. Sharon is crazy.) Of course this isn’t quite what I believe, and some of the adults who have the English correct me: Bush mish Majnoon . . . Bush is a businessman. Today I tried to learn to say “Bush is a tool,” but I don’t think it translated quite right. But anyway, there are 8-year-olds here much more aware of the workings of the global power structure than I was just a few years ago—at least regarding Israel.

Nevertheless, I think about the fact that no amount of reading, attendance at conferences, documentary viewing and word of mouth could have prepared me for the reality of the situation here. You just can’t imagine it unless you see it, and even then you are always well aware that your experience is not at all the reality: what with the difficulties the Israeli Army would face if they shot an unarmed US citizen, and with the fact that I have money to buy water when the army destroys wells, and, of course, the fact that I have the option of leaving. Nobody in my family has been shot, driving in their car, by a rocket launcher from a tower at the end of a major street in my hometown. I have a home. I am allowed to go see the ocean. Ostensibly it is still quite difficult for me to be held for months or years on end without a trial (this because I am a white US citizen, as opposed to so many others). When I leave for school or work I can be relatively certain that there will not be a heavily armed soldier waiting half way between Mud Bay and downtown Olympia at a checkpoint—a soldier with the power to decide whether I can go about my business, and whether I can get home again when I’m done.

So, if I feel outrage at arriving and entering briefly and incompletely into the world in which these children exist, I wonder conversely about how it would be for them to arrive in my world. They know that children in the United States don’t usually have their parents shot and they know they

sometimes get to see the ocean. But once you have seen the ocean and lived in a silent place, where water is taken for granted and not stolen in the night by bulldozers, and once you have spent an evening when you haven't wondered if the walls of your home might suddenly fall inward waking you from your sleep, and once you've met people who have never lost anyone—once you have experienced the reality of a world that isn't surrounded by murderous towers, tanks, armed “settlements” and now a giant metal wall, I wonder if you can forgive the world for all the years of your childhood spent existing—just existing—in resistance to the constant stranglehold of the world's fourth largest military—backed by the world's only superpower—in its attempt to erase you from your home.

That is something I wonder about these children. I wonder what would happen if they really knew.

As an afterthought to all this rambling, I am in Rafah, a city of about 140,000 people, approximately 60% of whom are refugees—many of whom are twice or three times refugees. Rafah existed prior to 1948, but most of the people here are, themselves, or are descendants of people who were relocated here from their homes in historic Palestine—now Israel. Rafah was split in half when the Sinai returned to Egypt. Currently, the Israeli army is building a 14-meter-high wall between Rafah in Palestine and the border, carving a no-man's-land from the houses along the border. 602 homes have been completely bulldozed according to the Rafah Popular Refugee Committee. The number of homes that have been partially destroyed is greater.

Today as I walked on top of the rubble where homes once stood, Egyptian soldiers called to me from the other side of the border, “Go! Go!” because a tank was coming. Followed by waving and “What's your name?” There is something disturbing about this friendly curiosity. It reminded me of how much, to some degree, we are all kids, curious about other kids: Egyptian kids shouting at strange women wandering into the path of tanks. Palestinian kids shot from the tanks when they peek out from behind walls to see what's going on. International kids standing in front of tanks with banners. Israeli kids in the tanks anonymously, occasionally shouting—and also occasionally waving—many forced to be here, many just aggressive, shooting into the houses as we wander away.

In addition to the constant presence of tanks along the border and in the western region between Rafah and settlements along the coast, there are more IDF towers here than I can count—along the horizon, at the end of streets. Some just army green metal. Others, these strange spiral staircases draped in some kind of netting to make the activity within anonymous. Some hidden, just beneath the horizon of buildings. A new one went up the other day in the time it took us to do laundry and to cross town twice to hang banners.

Despite the fact that some of the areas nearest the border are the original Rafah, with families who have lived on this

land for at least a century, only the 1948 camps in the center of the city are Palestinian-controlled areas under Oslo. But as far as I can tell, there are few if any places that are not within the sights of some tower or another. Certainly there is no place invulnerable to Apache helicopters or to the cameras of invisible drones we hear buzzing over the city for hours at a time.

I've been having trouble accessing news about the outside world here, but I hear an escalation of war on Iraq is inevitable. There is a great deal of concern here about the “reoccupation of Gaza.” Gaza is reoccupied every day to various extents, but I think the fear is that the tanks will enter all the streets and remain here, instead of entering some of the streets and then withdrawing after some hours or days to observe and shoot from the edges of the communities.

If people aren't already thinking about the consequences of this war for the people of the entire region, then I hope they will start. I also hope you'll come here. We've been wavering between five and six internationals. The neighborhoods that have asked us for some form of presence are Yibna, Tel El Sultan, Hi Salam, Brazil, Block J, Zorob, and Block O. There is also need for constant night-time presence at a well on the outskirts of Rafah since the Israeli army destroyed the two largest wells. According to the municipal water office the wells destroyed last week provided half of Rafah's water supply.

Many of the communities have requested internationals to be present at night to attempt to shield houses from further demolition. After about 10:00 p.m., it is very difficult to move at night because the Israeli army treats anyone in the streets as resistance and shoots at them. So clearly we are too few. I continue to believe that my home, Olympia, could gain a lot and offer a lot by deciding to make a commitment to Rafah in the form of a sister-community relationship. Some teachers and children's groups have expressed interest in e-mail exchanges, but this is only the tip of the iceberg of solidarity work that might be done. Many people want their voices to be heard, and I think we need to use some of our privilege as internationals to get those voices heard directly in the US. . . .

I am just beginning to learn, from what I expect to be a very intense tutelage, about the ability of people to organize against all odds, and to resist against all odds.

Thanks for the news I've been getting from friends in the US. I just read a report back from a friend who organized a peace group in Shelton, Washington, and was able to be part of a delegation to the large January 18th protest in Washington, D.C. People here watch the media, and they told me again today that there have been large protests in the United States and “problems for the government” in the UK. So thanks for allowing me to not feel like a complete polyanna when I tentatively tell people here that many people in the United States do not support the policies of our government, and that we are learning from global examples how to resist.