

IDF Shootings Spark Resistance in Israel

by Dean Andromidas

Soldiers of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) fired on Israeli demonstrators on Dec. 27 during a protest at the “separation fence” on the West Bank, better known as Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s new Berlin Wall. Several demonstrators were wounded, including one who almost lost his leg, and a member of the Swedish Parliament. And on Jan. 4, an Israeli military court sentenced five conscientious objectors to one-year prison sentences for refusing to be conscripted into the IDF.

Both actions represent the harsh response by the Sharon government to growing grassroots resistance to Israel’s continuing occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The occupation has become more and more brutal and has led to nearly 1,000 Israeli and 2,500 Palestinian deaths, the vast majority of whom are innocent civilians, including women and children. This considerable death toll, along with the thousands of wounded, has ensured that the suffering has touched everyone among both Israelis and Palestinians.

“Human life has lost its worth, and values we were raised on, such as purity of arms, have become a bad joke,” read a letter sent to IDF Chief of Staff Gen. Moshe Ya’alon. “A country in which the army disperses demonstrators by live gunfire is not a democratic country. . . . An Army that educates its soldiers that such a crime is conceivable has lost all restraint.”

The letter was sent by Lt. Col. Eitam Ronel, who had recently retired from the Israeli Army Reserves. Enclosed in his letter were the leaf emblems which serve as the insignia of his rank. His protest is yet another in the growing number of acts of conscience that are unprecedented in Israel’s history. Ronel’s letter, which also appeared in the Jan. 4 daily *Ha’aretz*, said, “Children regularly fall victim to our bullets in the occupied Palestinian territories; this is both illegal and immoral. . . . The blunders and the humiliations are becoming more and more serious and numerous, as neither the orders nor the punishments are clearly formulated.”

U.S. Presidential candidate Lyndon H. LaRouche signed the internationally circulated petition to free the five Israeli youths who have been sentenced for their refusal to serve in an “army of occupation.” The petition, which was sponsored by the Refuseniks Parents’ Forum, called for the release of Haggai Matar, Matan Kaminer, Shimri Tsameret, Adam Maor, and Noam Bahat, who, as of Jan. 7, had already served a year in prison while awaiting trial. Also on the list, but not



Five young Israelis refusing to serve in the occupied territories have been sentenced to another year in prison. But “refusal” has spread, from enlisted soldiers to Air Force pilots and now to elite special forces commandoes. Prime Minister Sharon’s response is to race to wall off a tiny “Palestinian state”—and perhaps to spread the war by hitting Syria. (See www.refuz.org.il.)

yet tried, is Yoni Ben Artzi, who is the nephew of Israeli Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The five were tried in a military court on the charge of “disobeying an order,” although they never were in the military. The government refused to try them in civil court, fearing this would put the occupation on trial. The one-year sentences are considered harsh, because the refusers had already spent one year in jail and the maximum possible sentence was three years.

“It is no surprise when a court of this kind sends us to prison, while soldiers and officers who commit crimes escape without punishment,” Mater said.

His statement is absolutely correct. Of the 2,500 Palestinians killed over the past three years, no fewer than 2,000 were innocent bystanders, the victims of soldiers and officers who presumably violated the rules of engagement—the Israeli government claims it does not have a policy of killing innocent Palestinians. Yet the military has opened only 72 investigations, resulting in 13 indictments. There has been only one conviction, which resulted in a suspended sentence, for a soldier who killed Mu’an Abu Lawy by firing his machinegun at a group of unarmed Palestinians who were walking 500 kilometers away from his position. The soldier was not convicted of manslaughter, but of the illegal use of a weapon.

Reflecting the arrogance of the IDF, the prosecutor of the five said that the sentence was “significant for the State of Israel. This punishment will cause them to backtrack on their refusal in a manner that at the end of the process, they will understand the error of their delinquent ways and will serve in the IDF.”

In response, the five told supporters, “If they think that this is what will bring down the refusal movement, they are wrong. . . . They have shot themselves in the foot by turning us into heroes.”

Member of the Knesset (parliament) from the Haddash party Mohammed Barakeh called the sentence a “draconian punishment.” He added that the five were a “conscientious beacon for a violent society.”

Member of the Knesset Roman Bronfman of the pro-peace Meretz party called for the sentences of the five to be commuted to national service. “Jailing these youngsters will not contribute a thing to the strength and social well-being of the State of Israel.”

While the five are among those who signed a high school petition two years ago declaring their opposition to serving in an “army of occupation,” they are not pacifists. They will be joining dozens of reserve soldiers and officers who have been imprisoned for refusing to serve in the Occupied Territories. These are the signatories of the famous “Combatants Letter,” which was initiated in 2002 and has garnered the signatures of 579 active reserve soldiers and officers.

Refusenik Movement Spreading

There is no doubt that the refusenik movement is the vanguard of the outrage that is spreading to all sectors of the population. On Dec. 21, Israeli reservists from the Sayeret Matkal special forces unit of the Israeli Army delivered a letter to Sharon and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, declaring their refusal to serve in the Occupied Territories. Sayeret Matkal is the elite of the elite IDF special operations units, and it has had among its commanders and members former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This is the unit that conducted the Entebbe raid that freed Israeli hostages in the 1970s.

The hard-hitting text reads, “We fear for the destiny of the children of this land, exposed to an evil that is unnecessary, and to which we have lent our hands. We have long transgressed the border of soldiers, just in their ways, and have become warriors suppressing another nation. We shall cross this border no more!” (see box).

“I was sent to suppress another nation,” one of the signatories, a major, told Israeli TV about being ordered to serve in the West Bank. “I was sent to be part of an occupying army. I don’t know what the political solution to this war is. But what I have to say is that I cannot bury my head in the sand—like so many in the army do. The IDF is out of control. The country is out of control. I was sent to serve as a defensive shield to the settlements, and this I refuse to continue doing. I shed my humanity in many little deeds and actions in the past, which I will not tell you about, and I will not do it any longer.”

The letter led to another outburst by Israel’s hard-liners, because only last Sept. 27, Israeli reserve pilots, including a brigadier general, signed a similar letter of refusal (see “Israeli Pilots Refuse Occupation Order,” *EIR*, Oct. 3, 2003). For example, Likud Knesset member and former member of the Shin Bet Ehud Yatom, infamous for having killed with his bare hands a handcuffed Palestinian prisoner in the 1980s, called for the soldiers to be “prosecuted and thrown out of

Sayeret Matkal Letter

We, citizens who serve in active reserve duty, fighters and officers, Sayeret Matkal veterans, have chosen to join the forward guard in the manner we have been trained. With grave concern for the future of Israel as a democratic Zionist and Jewish state, and with concern for her moral image, we can no longer stand aside. We tell you today:

We shall no longer lend our hand to the subjugation taking place in the territories.

We shall no longer lend our hand to the quelling of human rights of millions of Palestinians.

We shall no longer serve as a defense shield for the settlements campaign.

We shall no longer deface our human image, as an army of occupation.

We shall no longer deny our commitment as fighters in the Israeli *Defense Forces*.

We fear for the destiny of the children of this land, exposed to an evil that is unnecessary, and to which we have lent our hands. We have long transgressed the border of soldiers, just in their ways, and have become warriors suppressing another nation. We shall cross this border no more! We stress and state: We shall continue to protect the State of Israel and the security of its people from all enemies. "He who dares—wins."

the military."

But many members of the opposition, who denounced the act of refusal by the soldiers, nonetheless blamed the Sharon government for the current state of affairs.

Labor Party Knesset member Matan Vilnai, who was at one time deputy commander of the elite unit, criticized the letter as something that "cannot be accepted" but described refusal as "a phenomenon that stems from the feeling of lack of purpose in government policy."

Meretz Knesset member Yossi Sarid, who also does not support refusal, said that the phenomenon "shows that the occupation is also ruining the army."

Outrage at the fact that the occupation is destroying Israel as a nation crosses party lines. Maj. Gen. (Reserves) Shlomo Lahat, in a commentary in the Jan. 5 *Ha'aretz*, called the Israeli occupation of the West Bank a "breeding ground for hatred." Lahat is a former mayor of Tel Aviv and a member of Sharon's Likud. Describing a tour of the West Bank he took with a colleague, Brig. Gen. (Reserves) Yitzhak Elron, to observe the Israeli military checkpoints, Lahat wrote about the injustices and dehumanizing treatment of Palestinians at the hands of Israeli soldiers. He concluded, "I have the im-

pression that the only purpose of the checkpoints is to make things hard for the Palestinian population. I am convinced that the checkpoints constitute a breeding ground for hatred for Israel, and harm an innocent population in an inhumane manner." Lahat wrote that he supported the separation fence only if it went along the greenline border. "The present route, which cuts Palestinian villages in half, is causing an additional injustice to the population and is intensifying the hatred towards us," Lahat wrote. "For the sake of the Palestinians, but mainly for our own sake, the faster we end the occupation and leave the territories, the better for us. I am writing this because it is impossible to stand by and remain silent."

What Sharon May Fear

The soldiers and officers responsible for the Dec. 27 incident, in which Israeli troops shot and wounded members of the Israeli protest group "Anarchists Against the Fence," have gone virtually unpunished. In fact, the investigation has not levelled any blame on the military and its rules of engagement. Speaking at a press conference on Jan. 4, Uri Na'amati, the father of Gil Na'amati, who was seriously wounded in the incident, said, "One must be drunk to believe the IDF's version" about the circumstances of the shooting.

The shooting of an Israeli Jew by the IDF is unprecedented and forboding. The incident recalls an incident in Germany in November 1989, where the collapse of the Soviet empire began with the opening of the Berlin Wall. One reason the East Germans opened the Wall is that they feared that masses of unarmed demonstrators would attempt to force their way through, challenging the regime to enforce its shoot-to-kill order against anyone trying to breach the Wall. It was not just the prospect of perpetrating mass murder that stayed the hand of the hard-core East German communist leadership, but the fear that the soldiers of the regime's National People's Army, the cornerstone of the state, would refuse to shoot their own countrymen. Such an act of defiance alone would have brought down the despised regime.

Do Sharon and his generals have similar fears? The Dec. 27 firing on Israeli demonstrators points to the fact that Sharon is ready to use the army to quell not only Palestinian opposition, but Israeli opposition as well. Observers point out that the time is near when joint, peaceful mass demonstrations of Palestinians and Israelis could occur against Sharon's despised wall—Palestinians from the east and Israelis from the west.

One Israeli commentator recently wrote that under the rules of engagement, if demonstrators or rioters targeting the fence cannot be stopped by ground troops, aircraft will be used to "defend" the fence.

The obvious question becomes, will the IDF obey an order to attack its own people? Shooting at demonstrators, even those from a small, rowdy group outside the Israeli mainstream, will not be easily dismissed. It might be Sharon's warning to his opposition not to test him. But if he is tested, will the army shoot?