

Making Grief a Platform for Change - Opinion Piece by Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International

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In Jenin refugee camp, an old woman sits beside a pile of stones that was her house before the Israeli incursion. She shows me the identity card of her disabled son, Jamal, who was wheelchair-bound. She tells me that when the Israeli Defence Forces started to demolish her house, the women tried to carry Jamal out, but the walls crumbled and they ran out. Jamal was buried alive under the rubble.

Nearby an elderly man describes how Israeli soldiers asked his son to hand over to his wife the four-month old baby in his arms. He tells me that then they took his son, his neighbour's son and himself to a narrow passage behind the house. They asked them to raise their shirts and then sprayed them with bullets. The old man survived, saved by the body of his son falling on him. He pretended to be dead, until the soldiers moved away and he could crawl to safety.

In the courtyard of Jenin hospital, two ambulances lie, mangled by army tanks. The Medical Director tells me that for ten days Israeli tanks and snipers blocked the entrance to the hospital. For days he was not allowed to retrieve the dead or wounded. On 10 April, when the army finally allowed him to take his ambulance to the refugee camp, it took 11 hours of negotiations to evacuate one seriously wounded person.

Later I pick up the newspaper Ha'aretz. On the front page is the picture of a blood-covered teddy bear. It belonged to a five-year-old Israeli girl who was killed the night before in an attack by Palestinian armed men on an Israeli settlement near Hebron.

The next day I meet an Israeli who speaks proudly of his father who had devoted his life to the cause of Israeli-Palestinian friendship, but was killed in a suicide bombing in a café in Haifa on 31 March 2002. A 25-year old woman at the Sheba Tel Hashomer Rehabilitation Centre tells how, on her first day at work at the Park Hotel on 27 March 2002, a suicide bomb carried by a Palestinian exploded a few yards away from her. She is now paralysed from waist down.

The experiences of these people I met during my visit to Israel and the Occupied Territories last week show: Nothing justifies the targeting of civilians, the destruction of lives and livelihoods, the gross abuses of human rights and humanitarian law, whether in Haifa or Hebron, Jenin or Jerusalem. While the political debate rages about the security of Israel and the liberation of Palestine, the reality is that on both sides ordinary people are paying a heavy price for the escalating violence. Every day children are being maimed, lives are being destroyed with impunity.

Only an impartial approach, based on objective standards of international human rights and humanitarian law will break the cycle of violence in the Middle East. Establishing the facts is the first step towards justice for all victims. This is why I am deeply disappointed that UN initiatives, including establishing what happened in Jenin, appear to have been traded away in the interests of politics.

Amnesty International has called for a comprehensive, independent, international investigation of all abuses of human rights and humanitarian law.

There is credible evidence of serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights by Israeli forces in Jenin. To allow that to pass uninvestigated is an insult to the victims who deserve justice. There must be an inquiry not only in Jenin, but also in Nablus and Hebron. By the same token the responsibility of the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian armed groups must be determined. Deliberately targeting Israeli civilians violates the fundamental right to life. Those responsible for the suicide bombings, including those who assisted these heinous acts must be held to account and brought to justice.

There are many Palestinians who are angry and want revenge. But there are also Palestinians, including people I met in Jerusalem and Gaza, who condemn the killing of Israeli civilians. There are many Israelis who are afraid for their lives and see a military response as the only solution, but there are also those who think differently. One man, whose teenage daughter, Smadar, had been killed in a suicide bombing in September 1997, said to me: "I could have made my grief a tool for hatred, but I decided to make it a platform for change." Ariel Sharon, Yasser Arafat and George Bush must listen to the calls of the victims, and put respect for human rights and humanitarian law at the centre of political negotiations.

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