

The JENIN INQUIRY.org

Report on the Israeli Invasion of Jenin Refugee Camp

Appendix J: “We were ordered to fire heavy machine guns at ambulances”: Blockade at Jenin Hospital

Friday 5 April was the third day of the invasion of Jenin refugee camp and the last day that any injured person or corpse was allowed by the Israeli army to be evacuated from the camp to the Jenin hospital.

Here is testimony of one 21-year old male survivor:

“We were in the camp doing what we could to help the injured because no ambulances were allowed into the camp. We were moving from one place to another. We moved about the camp helping whomever we could for three days. At one point we entered the Hawashin neighborhood carrying four injured people. We went through doors and windows of the homes in order to try and reach a location where the ambulances could retrieve them. One we were carrying had been shot in his head; he was dead. He was in his window one floor above us just before he was shot. Then he disappeared, so we went up to check on him. The top of his head was gone and his brains were coming out. We carried him to an area where an ambulance could reach him. The third day of the invasion (5 April 2002) was the last time an ambulance came close to the camp.

“We went to a home near the Waqali. After entering, this house was rocketed by the Apache helicopters. One person with us received shrapnel in his face and all over his body and one was unconscious from the pressure created by the explosion. We left this house carrying the two injured and went to another house where five women began treating them. There was no electricity but we used a small lamp for illumination. There was also no first aid equipment so we tore off portions of our clothes to try to stop the bleeding.

“From the house we phoned the Jenin hospital. Israeli soldiers answered in Hebrew. We thought we had dialed the wrong number so we called again. Israeli soldiers answered in Hebrew again. We told our injured friend, “The soldiers are in the hospital. We can’t take you and there is no ambulance to take you.

“We called the Rasi Hospital. They said, ‘We will send an ambulance.’ After two hours, no one had showed up so we called again. They said, ‘It is forbidden for us to enter the camp.’”

At some point on or after 5 April, on orders of ranking officers in the Israeli army, the Jenin hospital was largely cut off from performing its duties.

Here is testimony from an Israeli soldier:

“There was an inspection point for ambulances at the exit from the Jenin hospital. The ambulances were only allowed to travel to the city, not to the refugee camp. We were told that this was because of the fighting in the camp.

“If someone was injured in the middle of the camp, he would not be treated. Palestinians in the camp were not allowed to move about and ambulances were not allowed to enter. IDF evacuation of the wounded only began about a week later. We were ordered to fire heavy machine guns at ambulances that ignored the inspection point. The orders came from the deputy battalion commander. The ambulances were generally taking dialysis patients and women in labor to the hospital. We had to check that there were no wanted persons in the ambulances. We would get everyone out of the ambulance. We had to make sure that the dead were really dead and other unpleasant things like that. The inspection point was muddy and full of garbage. In one case, the deputy battalion commander yelled, ‘Everybody out,’ and the driver had to carry an elderly man who couldn’t stand on him own and set him down in the mud.”¹

Testimony from both a resident and survivor of Jenin refugee camp and an Israeli soldier at the Jenin hospital corroborate with one another regarding the absence of possibility for Palestinians from the camp receiving medical care at Jenin hospital. The hospital was explicitly cut off from performing its services by direct order of a deputy battalion commander in the Israeli army, who controlled the area around the hospital at the time.

Under international law, barring medical care to the injured or sick in times of conflict is a war crime. The deputy battalion commander who ordered the hospital cut off and the firing of heavy machine guns at ambulances should be identified and tried for war crimes in an international court.

At the point that Palestinian medical services were cut off by the Israeli army, the only remaining force to treat the injured was the army itself. Though Israeli doctors apparently treated some Palestinians, certainly not many could have been due to the behavior of some officers upon having wounded Palestinians brought to them. Further, attempts by more concerned soldiers to assist the injured were curtailed by their commanding officers.

The same soldier continues his testimony:

“On April 10, three Palestinians who had been wounded by gunfire came to us. The medic treated them, and hooked them up to IVs. The battalion doctor came and looked at them, and said, “There’s nothing for me to do,” and left. I don’t think he even checked their pulses. We checked with the brigade [officials] to figure out what to do with them. We called them repeatedly. They said they were checking with the General Security Service to find out if they were wanted. We were not allowed to evacuate them to the hospital, not even in Israel. So we called a Palestinian doctor from the nearby hospital. He said that two of them had

¹ *Report: Operation Defensive Shield: Soldiers’ Testimonies, Palestinian Testimonies*, B’tselem, May, 2002, p. 24 www.btselem.org/Download/Defensive_Shield_Eng.pdf

moderate wounds, and the other was severely injured and had to be operated on. The brigade rejected all our requests to evacuate him. We suggested walking with them to the Palestinian hospital. The brigade did not permit it. The wounded men sat there for about six or seven hours until we finally received approval to take them to the Salim checkpoint. I have no idea what happened to them after that.

During the meeting we had at the end of reserve duty, the battalion commander was asked about the story regarding the doctor. I couldn't believe how he tried to whitewash it. He said he wasn't in the field and didn't know what really happened. Soldiers told him that they knew exactly what happened. He did not give a serious reply."²

It is clear from the evidence cited above that those injured or sick persons needing medical services were in dire condition during the course of the Israeli invasion. It is one issue if those needing medical treatment, including the chronically ill, could not reach the hospital because of the amount of gunfire. The case of Jenin refugee camp, however, is that those needing medical treatment could not access it because of direct orders from commanding officers in the Israeli army to forbid this basic need. Those giving the orders are labeled war criminals under international law and must be brought to trial for such crimes. The evidence is not lacking, only the political will.

² Ibid., 24.