

Shabura Camp, February 1990

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Umm Tala'at sat quietly, surrounded by her extended family and friends. The visitors had come to the Zakout family's bare, two-room house in Shabura Camp in Rafah, to mourn with Umm Tala'at for her 18-year-old son, Ayman, killed two days earlier by an Israeli soldier's bullet.

Eighteen months earlier, friends and family had gathered once before with Umm Tala'at, when her eldest son, Tala'at, also eighteen at the time, was shot and killed by soldiers of the occupation. Mrs. Zakout had raised Tala'at and Ayman, as well as their younger brother and two sisters, on her own; her husband had died fifteen years earlier. Umm Tala'at had herself spent 15 months in prison, beginning shortly before the intifada started. Among her cousins and extended family, nearly 25 people are currently in prison.

Rafah's Shabura Camp, at the southern tip of the Gaza Strip, has been the scene of four weeks of savage repression. Following the attack on an Israeli tourist bus in Egypt, Israeli occupation troops launched a massive retaliation against the people of Rafah. Some Israeli officials claimed the perpetrators of the bus incident came from Rafah. Palestinian residents dispute this, but the allegation was enough to justify a savage weeks-long siege using bullets, helicopters, and a fearsome gas, apparently a nerve gas, which collectively devastated the population.

It started with a curfew clamped on the camp. Then, as one Shabura resident described it, «After the first couple of days, they didn't seem to bother much with curfews. Except at night (during Gaza's 'normal' intifada curfew of 8:00 p.m. till 3:00 a. m.), the soldiers almost seemed to *want* us to go into the streets, so they could mow us down».

After the first few days, bullet-inflicted casualties strained the hospitals to overflowing. It was so bad, with scores of gunshot injuries every day, that UNRWA sent an almost-unprecedented letter of protest to the Israeli occupation authorities, stating concern about the high level of casualties and the resulting problems for the UNRWA medical facilities and personnel.

Some of the weapons created new challenges for the medical teams. Shabura residents described the horrific effects of a different type of gas than the usual extra-strong CS tear gas provided to the Israeli military by the U.S. «We haven't seen this kind of gas since the first weeks of the intifada,» one victim of the new gas said. «It seems to affect the neurological system, not just the eyes. It made people feel sleepy, and for some, it caused a kind of paralysis. For me, my hands were affected; I couldn't move my hands or close my fists for about half an hour.» A Gaza journalist, filming the helicopter-borne gas attack, described how the gas cannisters, still in cartons, were dropped in quantity on crowded residential sections of the refugee camp. «I saw one house where 22 cannisters of the gas had landed inside,» he said. «This was already seven hours after the gas was dropped, and I still couldn't stay in the house for even a minute. Imagine what it must have been like for the people inside.»

The cameraman described the cannisters as printed with green Hebrew letters, not written in English as the ordinary (US-supplied) tear gas cannisters usually are.

The local Palestinian cameraman was one of the only journalists working in Gaza during the most intense periods of the assault. The Israeli

occupation authorities had declared the entire Gaza Strip a «closed military area» during much of the Rafah assault, so that journalists and non-residents were routinely turned away at the checkpoints. But those restrictions would not, by themselves, have prevented the usually creative and often innovative press corps from finding a way in to the besieged camp, restrictions or no restrictions. The more serious problem lay in the virtual absence of the foreign press from all of Palestine during this period. Dozens of reporters, camera crews, radio correspondents, etc., once stationed in Jerusalem to cover the «intifada beat» have been transferred to new hot spots, with the eastern European capitals edging out the Palestinian uprising in the cut-throat competition for media attention.

Many Shabura residents described their anguish and their fear at the realization that the Israeli shootings, gassings, arrest raids and beatings, were taking place completely outside the spotlight of global media attention. Despite the difficult conditions facing Gaza residents because of economic deprivation and severe repression, especially in Shabura and the other camps, people are avid followers of the twists and turns of political developments in the Soviet Union, the European socialist countries, and other focal points of global conflict. But that political consciousness co-exists with a parallel awareness that every news team transferred from Jerusalem to Prague or Berlin means the loss of an important weapon in Palestine's battle for international public opinion.

There is bitter knowledge, too, that Tel Aviv is just as aware of that press vacuum in occupied Palestine, and that the Israeli assaults in Shabura, in Rafah, in Khan Yunis and elsewhere, against Tala'at and Ayman Zakout and the hundreds of other Gaza victims, are carefully designed to take advantage of that vacuum.