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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Bill Van Auken

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Israeli army kills four more Gaza protesters

For the fourth Friday in a row, the Israeli military responded to unarmed Palestinian demonstrators on Gaza's eastern border with live ammunition, killing four and wounding hundreds. The wanton repression brings the number killed since the beginning at the end of last month of the "Great March of Return" protests to at least 39.

Among those killed Friday was a 15-year-old boy, Mohammad Ibrahim Ayyoub. The three others murdered by Israeli snipers were identified as Ahmed Rashad, 24, Ahmed Abu Aqil, 25, and Saad Abdul Majid Abdul-Aal Abu Taha, 29.

The Gaza Health Ministry reported that a total of 729 Palestinians were wounded in the protests, including by live fire, rubber bullets and tear gas inhalation. At least 156 of the wounded were struck down by live ammunition.

Last week, one person was killed and 969 injured, including 233 hit by live fire from Israeli troops.

The protest, which has been backed by a wide range of Palestinian organizations, is to continue until May 15, observed by Palestinians as Nakba Day, or Day of Catastrophe. It marks the founding of the state of Israel, which was based upon the forced expulsion of 760,000 Palestinians from their villages and homes in 1948.

The "March of Return" demonstrations are in support of the right of these refugees and their descendants, who make up some 1.3 million out of Gaza's population of 1.9 million, and number at least 5.5 million internationally, to return to their homeland, a right guaranteed under international law and reaffirmed by United Nations resolutions.

Successive Israeli governments have rejected this right, given that its recognition would lead to an end of the Jewish majority within Israel itself.

The participation of large numbers of young Palestinians in protests that involve the strong likelihood of being shot dead or grievously wounded is more broadly a testament to the desperate conditions they confront within the blockaded and besieged enclave of Gaza, which has been justifiably compared to an open-air prison.

The unemployment rate for Gazans stands at roughly 46 percent, with 65 percent of those under 30 jobless.

In advance of Friday's protest, Israeli warplanes dropped leaflets over Gaza signed by the "IDF headquarters." It charged Gaza residents with participating in "violent disturbances"—not a single Israeli has been injured in the course of three weeks of protest—and warned them to "Stay away from the [border] fence and do not attempt to damage it." The warning came as protest organizers moved tents erected in conjunction with the demonstrations 50 meters closer to the fence.

In the midst of Friday's carnage, Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman visited Kibbutz Sa'ad on the Gaza border, gloating that, thanks to the murderous response of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), fewer demonstrated than on previous Fridays.

If, as the Israeli military has claimed, the number of protesters was reduced from the 10,000 who marched last Friday, the number of dead nonetheless increased fourfold. These numbers make clear that, despite widespread international denunciations of Israel's "shoot-to-kill" order against the unarmed Gazans, IDF troops have been instructed to step up the killing.

Liberman dismissed those gunned down inside Gaza as "hired activists." He further claimed that, as a result of the peaceful protests, "there are many more terror acts and a lot of terror activity."

Neither Liberman, nor anyone else in the right-wing Israeli government, has provided a shred of evidence to support their claims of Palestinian "terrorism" connected to the mass protests.

In recent weeks, however, there has been a sharp uptick in terrorist acts by right-wing Zionist settlers against Palestinians. On Wednesday, over 160 Israeli settlers forced their way into East Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound, a flashpoint for previous eruptions of conflict. Other settlers stormed the Bethlehem district site of Solomon's Pools and the Ramallah-district village of al-Mazraa al-Gharbiya. On Thursday night in the village of Burqa, settlers slashed the tires of Palestinian-owned vehicles and painted slogans on cars

and walls threatening that Palestinians would be “expelled and killed.” Last Friday, settlers attempted to set fire to a mosque near Nablus. And last month, they assaulted a bus of schoolchildren in Yatta town, south of Hebron, injuring several.

The IDF has issued warnings against the settler violence—which it regularly facilitates and assists—based on the concern that it will provoke mass upheavals in the occupied West Bank at the same time that Israeli troops are deployed to violently suppress the Gaza protests.

The World Health Organization has warned that the mass casualties inflicted by the Israeli security forces are threatening Gaza’s health care system with collapse. “Hospitals in Gaza are overwhelmed with the influx of injured patients,” said Dr. Gerald Rockenschaub, WHO’s head of office for the West Bank and Gaza Wednesday. “With further escalations expected during the coming weeks, the increasing numbers of injured patients requiring urgent medical care is likely to devastate Gaza’s already weakened health system, placing even more lives at risk.”

Rockenschaub went on to note that Gaza medical facilities “are already extremely limited due to chronic shortages of medicines, medical disposables, and inadequate supplies of electricity and fuel for emergency generators in hospitals,” all of which are the result of Israel’s blockade—aided by Egypt—of the territory. Israel has also refused permission for gravely wounded Palestinians to leave Gaza to seek medical treatment, a vicious act of collective punishment.

Palestinian health officials have charged that the IDF is using new and more devastating weaponry against the unarmed protesters. Dr. Ashraf al-Qidra, a spokesman for the Gaza Health Ministry, said that Israeli snipers were using a new kind of ammunition that was causing grievous injuries.

“The bullets we’re seeing now are the deadliest the Israeli army has ever used,” al-Qidra told the Amman-based news site *Al Bawaba*. “The bullet penetrates the body and explodes inside, damaging multiple organs—not just the targeted area,” he added. He also charged the IDF with employing a new type of gas, far more toxic than regular tear gas, which was inducing violent convulsions and vomiting among its victims.

The European Parliament Thursday issued a resolution calling on Israel to “refrain from using lethal force against unarmed protesters” and noting that the use of such force against unarmed protesters constituted a “serious breach” of the Geneva Conventions, i.e., a war crime.

The UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov declared in a tweet, “It is OUTRAGEOUS to shoot at children!” and demanded an investigation into the killing of the 15-year-old on Friday.

The US State Department, however, has steadfastly refused to criticize Israel’s bloodletting. At a press conference called by the department Friday in conjunction with the release of its 2017 Country Reports on Human Rights, spokesperson Heather Nauert, formerly of Fox News, repeatedly refused to take questions on Gaza.

The US corporate media has followed the State Department’s lead, providing little if any coverage of the mass shootings of unarmed protesters. If these events had taken place in Russia, Iran, Venezuela or Syria, they would have produced front-page headlines and non-stop broadcast reports. Because Israel is a key ally in US imperialism’s drive to assert its hegemony over the Middle East, the media dutifully covers up its crimes.

Also largely silent are the bourgeois Arab regimes. It was reported that last Saturday envoys from the Egyptian security services visited Gaza and demanded that Hamas, which governs the territory, call off the protests. Hamas officials reportedly rejected the appeal, pointing out that the “March of Return” enjoys broad popular support.

Egypt was no doubt acting on behalf of Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni oil monarchies, which are ever more closely aligning themselves with the US and Israel in preparation for military confrontation with Iran. The dictatorial regime of Gen. Abdul Fattah al-Sisi also fears that the eruptions in Gaza could spread to its own border with the territory, threatening to reignite social upheavals in Egypt itself.