

# Op Ed: Rafah's Human Face

by Starhawk

Thursday, May 20, 2004

Just over a year ago, I held Nehad's six year old, curly haired charmer of a daughter on my lap and scooped eggs from a plate shared by her five other children as bullets thudded into the walls of her home in the border zone of Rafah. With shy pride, Nehad told me the eggs were from her own chickens, the oranges from the few trees that remained undamaged in her garden. The kids watched cartoons on TV, inured to the rat-a-tat-tat of constant fire until the bullets grew so loud that even they dived to the floor.

Each time I'd stay at Abu Akhmed's house, he would tease me about being Jewish, then try to determine which of his friends might make me a good husband, so that I could stay in Rafah. A farmer, 45 of his trees had already been bulldozed. In the evenings, old men would gather around a small fire in a tin can, brew tea and talk while tanks cruised past the gates and the occasional shot crashed into the walls.

I was there with the International Solidarity Movement, which supports nonviolent resistance against the Occupation. I had come down to Rafah to support the teams that were with Rachel Corrie, the young ISM member who was crushed to death by an Israeli military bulldozer while trying to prevent a home demolition, and Tom Hurndall, who was shot by an Israeli sniper while trying to rescue children who were under fire.

These are the homes that are being crushed in Rafah: the old farmhouses of the original families of the area, the crowded apartment blocks of the refugees, the stacked flats of extended families, the fabric of a community that kept its ties strong in the face of enormous oppression. Nehad's orange trees are gone, her family's olive groves razed, her children homeless. And much more than walls and toys and family pictures have been destroyed. A child's sense of security and trust in the world, an old woman's simple dignity, a family's roots, a gardener's easy generosity have all fallen before the assault.

For the last year, members of the ISM and other human rights groups have been kept out of Rafah and the Gaza strip by the military. But we have supported the growing nonviolent resistance in the West Bank, where the villages in the path of the Israeli "security" wall have resisted the confiscation of their lands and the destruction of their communities with almost daily demonstrations that have been met with sound bombs, rubber bullets, tear gas, horses, clubs, and real bullets. The unmentioned trade-off for Sharon's "disengagement" from Gaza has been Bush's legitimization of this wall, which eats deep into Palestinian territory, annexes the illegal settlements which have pushed far into the West Bank, turns the West Bank cities into open-air prison enclaves, and

destroys the viability of any future Palestinian state, effectually ending the possibility of a two-state solution.

The wall and the settlements are part of a long-planned strategy by the religious right to annex the West Bank, which is the historic land of biblical Judea and Samaria, where Abraham walked and where the prophets raised their outcries against injustice.

There was no great outcry when Israeli soldiers shot dead nonviolent demonstrators in the village of Biddu, five of whom have been killed in the last six months in peaceful demonstrations. There was no massive condemnation of the beating of women by soldiers on horseback at demonstrations in April where Israeli supporters were brutalized along with Palestinians. These acts were precursors of the extreme violence which has characterized the last few days in Rafah, and which has finally awakened the voice of the international community.

War crimes and brutalization cannot bring peace. Murdering children is no way to stop suicide bombers from murdering children.

Security can only be attained through a political solution that recognizes the rights of both peoples, that values Palestinian lives and children as well as Israeli lives.

It is time for all of us who care for human rights to join those prophets and to join with Palestinians and those Jews and Israelis who cry out against injustice, who refuse to accept "security" as justification for crimes against humanity. We must name war crimes for what they are and demand an end to the Occupation, in Rafah, in Gaza, and in the West Bank: an end to targeted assassinations, a moratorium on the wall's construction, an end to US funding for Sharon's criminal policies, and a beginning of true, good faith negotiations toward a just peace. If we remain silent, we are complicit in those crimes. If we want peace in that torn and bleeding land, we must first bring about justice.

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Starhawk is the author of nine published books about spirituality and activism, including *The Fifth Sacred Thing* and *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising*. She has made four trips to the Occupied Territories with the International Solidarity Movement, [www.palsolidarity.org](http://www.palsolidarity.org). Her writings from Palestine and other actions are archived on her website, [www.starhawk.org](http://www.starhawk.org).

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## **Letter from Gila Svirsky Coalition of Women for Peace Israel**

Friends, We need your help.

There is an emergency situation right now in the Gaza Strip and the town of Rafah, in particular, with scenes that bring to mind Israel's invasion of Jenin and Nablus in the spring of 2002. So far today, 18 Palestinians were killed, but the action continues. Last weekend, 116 homes were destroyed, making over a thousand people homeless ([www.btselem.org](http://www.btselem.org)). Hundreds more are slated for destruction. Amira Hass, filing dramatic daily reports from inside Rafah, describes the scenes of people grabbing their children and whatever comes to hand and fleeing their homes, anticipating the entry of the bulldozer-tanks ([www.haaretzdaily.com](http://www.haaretzdaily.com)). Even Yossi Sarid from the Yahad Party (formerly called Meretz), normally a staunch defender of the IDF, described actions in Rafah as "war crimes". My friend In'am called me from Gaza trembling with fear, and reported that the Palestinian news broadcaster broke down in tears as he spoke.

Many -- Israelis, internationals and Palestinians -- are desperately trying to halt the bloodshed. The Israeli women's peace movement just placed an ad in Ha'aretz calling for an immediate halt to the violence and renewal of negotiations for a peace agreement that will extract us from all the occupied territories ("True and enduring solutions," we wrote, "are attained by negotiation, not destruction, revenge or humiliation"). This morning, forty women drove to Gaza to see if they could intervene physically, but they are being prevented from entering Gaza by the army. The women have set up an encampment at the Sufa checkpoint and say they will not leave until the army stops its actions there. Other peace and human rights organizations have placed newspaper ads, and many are organizing a larger delegation to join the women on Friday.

International figures have begun to speak out, but we need more, and quickly. Can you please take a moment to write a letter (email or fax) or make a phone call to any or all of the list below? A sample letter is appended.

Please take a minute to try to save someone's life or home. Imagine that you had to walk out the door of your home at this very moment, with nothing but what your arms can carry, and you would never see your home or its contents ever again. Please make a couple of calls.

*Gila Svirsky*

Coalition of Women for Peace:  
[www.coalitionofwomen4peace.org](http://www.coalitionofwomen4peace.org)

### **Sample letter text:**

There is an emergency situation in the Gaza Strip right now. Please demand that Prime Minister Sharon halt the death and destruction wrought there by the Israeli army. The cycle of bloodshed must end.

Contact people (First try the US, European and UN officials. All the fax numbers work):

(1) President George W. Bush -- Tel (202) 456-2461; Fax (202) 456-2461.

(2) Secretary of State Colin Powell -- Tel (202) 261-8577; Fax (202) 261-8577.

(3) US Ambassador to Israel Daniel Kurtzer -- Tel in Israel: (+972-3) 519-7575  
[webmaster@usembassy-israel.org.il](mailto:webmaster@usembassy-israel.org.il)

(4) Your member of Congress: Call the Capital switchboard toll-free: 1-800-839-5276 and ask to be connected to your member of Congress.

For your information, you can send a free fax by internet (to certain places only, but definitely area code 202 in the US) at <http://www.tpc.int/sendfax.html> . Note that this is a service provided for free, but is not to be used for bulk fax mailings because they can only handle a relatively limited number of faxes at once. [Thanks, Mike Wolfson, for this info.]

(5) UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, [coi@un.org](mailto:coi@un.org)

(6) Council of the European Union, [public.info@consilium.eu.int](mailto:public.info@consilium.eu.int)

(7) European Union, [civis@europarl.eu.int](mailto:civis@europarl.eu.int)

(8) Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Fax (+972 2) 670-5361, [rohm@pmo.gov.il](mailto:rohm@pmo.gov.il)

(9) Minister of Defense Shaul Mofaz, Fax (+972 3) 691-6940, [sar@mod.gov.il](mailto:sar@mod.gov.il)

(10) Minister of Justice Yosef Lapid, Fax: (+972 2) 628-5438, [sar@justice.gov.il](mailto:sar@justice.gov.il)