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European Languages	زبانهای اروپائی

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01.04.2024

Rachel Corrie Gave Her Life for Palestine

This day in 2003, the IDF killed American activist Rachel Corrie as she defended homes in Rafah from destruction. As Israel threatens to invade the city, a volunteer who stood alongside Rachel writes on her legacy — a call for steadfast solidarity with Gazans.

Rachel Corrie, then twenty-three, speaks during a mock trial of US president George W. Bush on March 5, 2003 in Rafah refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. (Abid Katib / Getty Images)

Today there may be no town on Earth denser with misery and foreboding than Rafah, pushing up against Gaza's border with Egypt.

Since mid-October, Israeli forces have already bludgeoned their way through Gaza City and Khan Younis, massacring, destroying homes, and leaving starvation and terror in their wake. More than one million Palestinians fled south to Rafah, swelling its population to seven times its earlier size.

But now, Israel's sights are set on Rafah itself — threatening a devastating invasion.

Rafah is today a sprawling city of canvas and plastic sheeting as much as concrete; cold and often sodden, hungry and distraught. Disease is spreading, as people barter what little food they have for medicine, and women tear scraps from tents to use as sanitary towels. Orphans — there may be as many as ten thousand in Rafah — fend as best they can.

Last year, Israel dropped leaflets over Khan Younis telling Palestinians to go to "shelters" in Rafah, to escape the fighting. But there are no shelters, and there has been no escape. Early in the war, a friend lost thirty-five members of his extended family in a single air strike on the town. Most were women and children.

More frequent than attacks on Rafah itself, the sound of air strikes echo from the north, an ominous reminder that the worst may yet be to come.

Last month, Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed that a failure to invade Rafah would be tantamount to his country's defeat, and that he would order an invasion even if all the Israeli hostages were released.

US secretary of state Antony Blinken has said that Washington will not support an invasion of Rafah without a "clear" plan to protect civilians, and that no plan has been provided yet. Israeli officials are reported to be working on a scheme to transfer Palestinians in Rafah to "humanitarian islands" to the north — where, already, food and medicine are scarcer still, and people have starved to death.

President Joe Biden has said that an invasion of Rafah would be a "red line," but promised no consequences if Israel crosses that red line, as it has crossed so many others. Netanyahu, as he has before, responded with contempt: "We'll go there. We're not going to leave them," he said.

"Razed and Bullet-Riddled and Bare"

At the height of the second intifada, in 2002–03, I lived in Rafah as a volunteer with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), a Palestinian-led organization that supports nonviolent resistance to the occupation. Among my colleagues was Rachel Corrie, an American volunteer from Olympia, Washington State, in the United States, with a zany sense of humor that belied a seriousness about life — and the purpose of it — that I would not fully understand until reading her writing years later. Later to join the group was Tom Hurndall, a talented photographer who was shot through the head by an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) sniper in April 2003, and died the next year after a nine-month coma.

Rachel Corrie. (Courtesy of the Corrie family)

Rafah, even then, was “razed and bullet-riddled and bare,” as Rachel put it in a message to her parents. We spent most nights in the houses of families near the border with Egypt. Israel had been creating an empty strip of land there, demolishing homes to create a free-fire zone, and so a tactical advantage for their troops who occupied positions along the border. Sometimes they warned families to leave with bullhorns. Sometimes they shot into the homes until the families fled. And at any moment of day or night, demolition or not, they might rake the homes on the border’s edge with gunfire.

Not every bullet fired at a wall penetrates the building — but some do, especially those fired from more powerful weapons. Everyone who stayed at our friend Abu Jamil’s house, including Rachel, could not but notice, as they played with his children, the pockmarks left by bullets that struck the interior wall, at head height, over the kitchen sink.

When Palestinians called us, we used to go out to protest Israel’s armored bulldozers as they worked along the border strip, watching them and trying to intercede if they moved to demolish a home. We slowed them down a few times, made it more awkward, gave a family here or there a respite of a few days, or weeks. Perhaps we dragged the global spotlight onto that strip of land more frequently than if we hadn’t been there. But the demolition rumbled on. And the world had other preoccupations: the invasion of Iraq was looming.

Cynthia and Craig Corrie, parents of Rachel, with the Nasrallah family. (Courtesy of the Corrie family)

On March 16, 2003, a little after 5:00 p.m., I watched as one of Israel's US-made bulldozers, huge and hulking, turned toward the house of Dr Samir Nasrallah and his young family. Rachel, a friend of Dr Samir's, placed herself between the bulldozer and the house. As the bulldozer started toward her, it began to build up a roiling mound of earth in front of its blade. As the mound reached Rachel, she began to climb it, struggling to keep her footing on the soft earth, steadying herself with her hands, until her head was mostly over the level of the blade. The driver might have looked her in the eye. But he ploughed on, and she began to lose her footing.

A few weeks before that day, Rachel had a dream about falling, which she recorded in her journal:

. . . falling to my death off of something dusty and smooth and crumbling like the cliffs in Utah, but I kept holding on, and when each new foothold or handle of rock broke, I reached out as I fell and grabbed a new one. I didn't have time to think about anything — just react . . . And I heard, "I can't die, I can't die," again and again in my head.

The soil on the Rafah border, an uneven mixture of clay and sand, has a warm hue, not so different from that of the Utah cliffs. From across the years, like much of Rachel's writing, the nightmare seems to have the quality of a premonition.

Try though she did, Rachel could not keep her footing; the bulldozer pushed on, it dragged her under, pushed her into the earth, crushed her insides. She died as I held her hands in the

ambulance, on the way to the hospital. In my initial account of the event, written two days later, I noted that ten Palestinians had been killed across Gaza since Rachel, largely without notice beyond the enclave itself.

Rachel Corrie stands in front of an IDF bulldozer in Rafah, Gaza, on the day she was killed. (Courtesy of ISM Palestine)

My own friendship with Rachel aside, there is a discomfort in relating this that it is necessary to acknowledge, especially today, in the light of the devastation that Rafah faces. Part of our aim, all those years ago, was to exploit a racist structure of violence, and the racist structure of attention that sits alongside it, in order to undermine those same structures. Some people might believe that such an attempt was always quixotic, or that any bid to exploit such a racist structure, such as our effort to pull international eyes to Gaza, is inevitably to affirm that structure.

Regardless, having made my choice, more than two decades ago, I am committed. Whenever I am asked to speak about Rachel, I do so, not only to honor a friend, but on the theory that perhaps her story is a way to render comprehensible to some people, far from Palestine, broader truths about the violence of occupation, and the politics that make that violence possible. And that those truths lead us ultimately back to Palestinians, and back to Rafah. I believe they lead other places too.

Israel's military operates under the assumption of impunity. So, when some exceptional event, such as the killing of a non-Palestinian, raises the prospect of accountability, the

system is ill prepared to respond. The result is often a series of bizarre lies. In Rachel's case, the authorities could have stuck to disputing details of our eyewitness testimonies. Instead, they also fabricated the claim that Rachel had "hid behind an earth embankment" and was hit by a falling concrete slab. Our photographs of the scene, both before and after Rachel was killed, showed that she was standing in open ground.

In a familiar pattern, the official response was, in approximate order: we didn't do it, we did it but it wasn't our fault, even if it was our fault we aren't liable, and anyway they were terrorists. The IDF's commander for the southern Gaza strip at the time of the killing told a Haifa court, presumably with a straight face, that "a terror organisation sent Rachel Corrie to obstruct IDF soldiers. I am saying this in definite knowledge." Observers of the current war will recall a series of similarly "definite" pronouncements.

Israel's Impunity Is an American Export

Volunteers who travel to a place of war to stand with those on the front lines have always been at the heart of the internationalist tradition. And that remains true today, whether accompanying shepherds and olive-pickers in the hills of the West Bank, running supplies to Ukrainian soldiers on the front lines of the war with Russia, giving medical support to the revolutionaries of Myanmar, or fighting the so-called Islamic State group alongside the People's Protection Units in northeastern Syria. These endeavors, and the people who undertake them, shouldn't be idealized. But the deep solidarity and connection they embody are unique.

The solidarity of volunteers who travel to a place of war to stand with those on the front lines needs to be joined to a complementary project that seeks to mobilize the power of states — especially the United States — toward the same ends.

Still, this sort of thing isn't for everyone. And it doesn't need to be. The solidarity of volunteers needs to be joined to a complementary project that seeks to mobilize the power of states — especially the United States — toward the same ends. That's something most people can get involved in somehow. In the case of Palestine, it starts by building public support and political pressure toward a cease-fire and a halt to military aid to Israel. That includes unrelenting pressure on Biden and the defense of congressional advocates of a cease-fire from those who want to punish their stance.

The United States underwrites Israel's occupation through massive military and financial aid, and it is underwriting the present war on Gaza. Jeremy Konyndyk, a former senior Biden administration official, told the *Washington Post* that the administration had facilitated "an extraordinary number of sales over the course of a pretty short amount of time, which really

strongly suggests that the Israeli campaign would not be sustainable without this level of US support."

The result, always painfully evident in Rafah, is that Israel's impunity is an American export. But a withdrawal of support will, in all likelihood, not be enough. Sanctions designed to coerce the recognition of Palestinians' fundamental rights will be necessary. They will need to go far beyond targeting individual settlers or their supporters.

The call for sanctions is a direct challenge to the main, unspoken tenet of US policy toward Israel. Biden and his subordinates will speak about the need for a Palestinian state, and the need for Israel to show restraint. But their main principle, which has held absolute for three decades and was predominant for decades before that, is that Israel must never be *forced* to make such concessions. Israel may be cajoled, flattered, persuaded, and nudged, but never compelled. The result is that Palestine is held in a permanent state of exception.

A relative of Dr Nasrallah, the pharmacist whose family home Rachel was defending when she was killed, told me that he felt as though Rafah had been sucked into a "black hole, where international rules do not apply, and the world cannot see or feel us."

He describes returning home one afternoon to a scene of carnage, the aftermath of an air strike on a neighboring building, in which at least two families were entirely wiped out and another lost two children. (Friends of the Nasrallahs are raising funds to help them out of harm's way.) The relative, who asked that his name not be used, said that it was now common to see men breaking down in tears at the slightest defeat, unable to provide for their wives or children. "We speak," he said, "about a fine line between life and death."

An invasion of Rafah, which may be several weeks away, would be a disaster "beyond imagining," United Nations doctors say. As Rachel put it a few weeks before she was killed: "I think it is a good idea for us all to drop everything and devote our lives to making this stop."