

# The Bush Administration and Congress Join the Cover-up in the Murder of Rachel Corrie

By Stephen Zunes | March 29, 2003

There has been a real fear in recent months that the right-wing government of Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon might take advantage of the international focus on the U.S. invasion of Iraq to increase its repression in the occupied Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Few people realized, however, that one of the first casualties would be a young American.

In December 2001, as violent Palestinian protests against the then 34-year Israeli occupation increased along with Israeli repression, the United States vetoed a UN Security Council resolution calling for the placement of unarmed human rights monitors in the occupied territories. In response, a number of pacifist groups from the United States and Europe began to send their own representatives to play the role of human rights monitors, even to the point of physically placing their bodies between the antagonists.

Among these volunteers was Rachel Corrie, a 23-year-old student at the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Of particular concern for her and her colleagues was the Israeli practice of bulldozing Palestinian homes and orchards, a direct violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention and a series of UN Security Council resolutions that call upon Israel to abide by this legally binding international human rights covenant. The position of the Bush administration, however, like that of the Clinton administration before it, was to block the United Nations from enforcing its resolutions when they were directed at an important strategic ally such as Israel, even as the United States prepared to invade Iraq in the name of enforcing UN Security Council resolutions.

On March 16, in the Rafah refugee camp in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip, Israeli occupation forces were planning to destroy the home of a Palestinian physician and his family. Rafah is supposed to be under the exclusive control of the Palestinian Authority, according to a series of disengagement agreements brokered by the U.S. government following the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords. Though the United States is supposed to be the guarantor of the accords and UN Security Council resolution 1435 calls upon Israel to withdraw to its September 2000 zones of

control, the Bush administration has refused to insist that Israel end its re-occupation of Rafah and other parts of designated Palestinian territory.

Rachel was among a group of international observers who stood in front of the bulldozer as a form of non-violent resistance against this illegal act by Israeli occupation forces. According to both Palestinian and American eyewitnesses, Rachel was standing in plain site of the bulldozer's driver. She was wearing a bright fluorescent orange jacket and had engaged the driver in conversation to try to convince him not to destroy the house. Nevertheless, after an initial pause, the bulldozer surged forward despite cries from Rachel's colleagues, trapping her feet under the dirt so she could not get out of the way before running her over. The bulldozer then backed up, running Rachel over a second time, mortally wounding her. She died in a nearby hospital a short time later.

The Israeli government claims that it was an accident. Incredibly, the Bush administration has accepted this interpretation.

In many respects, however, the Bush administration's response to Rachel's murder is not surprising. While Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other reputable human rights organizations—including Israeli groups such as B'Tselem, Rabbis for Human Rights, and Yesh G'vul—have decried the widespread attacks by Israeli occupation forces against the civilian Palestinian population, leading members of Congress, such as House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi, have insisted that Israeli military actions have been aimed “only at the terrorist infrastructure.”

Four months ago, the United States vetoed a UN Security Council resolution criticizing Israel for the mur-

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der of three United Nations workers in two separate incidents in the occupied territories in December. Among these was British relief worker Iain Hook, who was assisting in the reconstruction of Palestinian homes destroyed during an Israeli military offensive last spring. This veto undoubtedly gave the Israelis the confidence that they could literally get away with murder, even if it involved a foreign national.

To top it off, President George W. Bush is preparing to reward Israel for its repression. Despite enormous cutbacks in domestic spending for education, health care, public transportation, housing, and the environment, the Bush administration has announced that it intends to increase military aid to Israel by one billion dollars while providing an additional eight billion dollar loan guarantee to Israel's rightist government. Israel is already the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid, taking in nearly one-third of the entire U.S. foreign aid budget despite being a relatively affluent country making up only one one-thousandth of the world's population. This is part of an aid package that includes increased U.S. military aid to various Arab dictatorships and other repressive regimes in the Middle East as well.

It appears that the Democrats will be joining the Republicans in support for this additional aid package that will further militarize the already overly militarized Middle East. Indeed, Representative Pelosi and most of her Democratic colleagues have gone on record praising President Bush's "leadership" in his unconditional support for the policies of Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon in the face of widespread international condemnation of his government's poor human rights

record and its ongoing violations of international law and UN Security Council resolutions.

This should not be surprising. President Jimmy Carter, despite claims of supporting human rights, dramatically increased military aid to the murderous junta in El Salvador just six weeks after its forces, under direct orders from top military officers, raped and murdered three American nuns and an American Catholic lay worker. In similar fashion, President Ronald Reagan increased support for the Nicaraguan terrorists known as the Contras not long after they murdered Ben Linder, a young American engineer who was assisting a rural Nicaraguan village in a micro-dam project that would for the first time bring electricity to its residents.

In short, both Republicans and Democrats believe that the lives of Americans who work for justice in Third World conflict areas are secondary to ensuring the profits of American arms merchants and the pursuit of narrowly defined strategic objectives. Perhaps the best thing we can do in memory of Rachel Corrie and the others is to vote out of office the politicians who made their murders possible.

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