Jabalia Camp Massacre 2003: Tank Fire on a Firefighting Crowd

On the night of Thursday, 6 March 2003, Israeli occupation forces invaded the town and camp of Jabalia in the northern Gaza Strip with dozens of tanks and heavy vehicles, under cover of combat helicopters and artillery fire, shelling homes and demolishing some. In the morning a tank fired a shell into a crowd of civilians who had gathered to help firemen put out a fire in a shop. Eleven Palestinians were killed, including three children and a fireman, and about 140 were wounded. [1] [2] [3]

The UN Secretary-General deplored the “disproportionate and excessive force,” saying such operations in densely populated areas violate international humanitarian law. [3]

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The Jabalia camp massacre at a glance

Item	Details
Date	Thursday, 6 March 2003, from midnight into the morning [1] [2]

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Place	The town and camp of Jabalia, northern Gaza Strip [1]
Perpetrator	Dozens of heavy Israeli military vehicles, tanks and combat helicopters [1] [3]
Method	Helicopter missiles, artillery shelling of homes, house demolitions, then a tank shell on a crowd helping firemen [1]
Killed	11, including three children, a fireman, a policeman and a muezzin [1] [2]
Wounded	About 140, including two journalists and paramedics [2] [3] [1]
Demolition	8 houses totally and 3 partially destroyed, and electricity, water and telephone infrastructure destroyed [1]

The invasion: the night of 6 March 2003

At about midnight occupation forces, with dozens of heavy vehicles and combat helicopters and under intense shelling, advanced about four kilometers south from the Beit Hanoun crossing along Salah al-Din Street, then about a kilometer into al-Quds Street. Helicopters fired six missiles at the road between Jabalia town and the camp, one of which struck near the home of the muezzin Mohammed Shihda al-Bayari (54), killing him. [1]

At about 3:30 a.m. the forces blew up two Ziada family homes with explosives, after forcing out their residents and arresting three men. At about 5:30 a.m. artillery shells hit the four-storey house of Ahmed Mohammed Faraj Saleh, setting fire to the shops beneath it; firefighters could not reach it until 6:45. [1] The forces destroyed the electricity, water and telephone networks. [1]

A shell on the firefighting crowd

After the firefighters arrived, civilians gathered to help them put out the flames and carry furniture out of the burning shop, and an Israeli tank fired a shell into the crowd. The fire engines and firemen were clearly marked. [1] [2] According to witnesses and news agencies, eight were killed by this shell alone, [2] [3] among

them the fireman Naji Abu Jalila and the child Tha'er Rihan (14). [1]

The occupation army first claimed the shell hit a gunman aiming a launcher at the troops, then claimed the victims were killed by charges exploding inside the shop. [3] The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights rejected these claims, affirming that the victims were killed by a tank shell, and said it was investigating whether it was a flechette shell, according to medical sources. [1]

The killed and the wounded

Name	Age	Notes
Bahaa Khalil Abu Warda	18	Tank shell on the crowd
Hamza Jibril Qarmout	17	Child, tank shell on the crowd
Naji Isma'il Abu Jalila	24	Fireman, tank shell on the crowd
Tha'er Jaber Rihan	14	Child, tank shell on the crowd
Hamdi Othman Abed Obaid	23	Tank shell on the crowd
Maher Ahmed al-Najjar	14	Child, shot in the head
Muhsen Awad Abu Ouda	30	Policeman, shot in the head while walking home
Abdul Rahman Mahmoud Mohammed Miqdad	21	Shot in the chest
Na'el Mahmoud Abu Seedu	30	Shot in the chest and abdomen
Mohammed Shihda al-Bayari	54	Muezzin, missile shrapnel near his home
Eihab Ahmed Nabhan	21	Helicopter fire

The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights documented the names of the eleven killed, and Mahmoud Hassan al-Zainati (35) died in al-Shifa Hospital on 8 March of his wounds. [1] About 140 were wounded, 35–40 of them seriously, [2] [3] including two Reuters journalists and four ambulance crew members, and three ambulances were damaged, one belonging to UNRWA. [1]

Reactions

Palestinians said the eight killed by the tank shell were unarmed civilians; chief negotiator Saeb Erekat called the invasion “an act of revenge by the Israeli Government” and urged the Quartet to intervene, and the Palestinian Authority accused Israel of committing another massacre. [3]

The UN Secretary-General deplored the “disproportionate and excessive force,” the Greek EU Presidency “strongly deplores” the indiscriminate use of force, and UNRWA Commissioner-General Peter Hansen said he was “deeply distressed and saddened” by the “indiscriminate and excessive use of force” in densely populated areas. [3]

Read about the Zionist massacres against the Palestinian people.

Conclusion

In a single night in March 2003, occupation forces shelled and demolished homes in Jabalia and destroyed its electricity and water networks, then fired a tank shell at people helping firemen put out a fire, killing 11 Palestinians, including three children and a fireman, and wounding about 140. The Jabalia camp massacre remains a testament to the targeting of civilians and rescue crews in Gaza’s most crowded camp.

Frequently asked questions about the 2003 Jabalia camp massacre

When did the Jabalia camp massacre take place?

It took place on the night and morning of Thursday, 6 March 2003, during an Israeli invasion of the town and camp of Jabalia.

How many people were killed in the 2003 Jabalia camp massacre?

Eleven Palestinians were killed, including three children; a twelfth died of his wounds two days later, and about 140 were wounded.

What happened to the crowd near the firemen?

An Israeli tank fired a shell at civilians who had gathered to help firemen put out a shop fire; eight were killed according to witnesses, including a fireman and a child.

Were flechette shells used in the massacre?

The circulated account says so, and the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights said it was investigating the matter based on medical sources.

What was the international reaction to the Jabalia massacre?

The UN Secretary-General deplored the disproportionate and excessive force, and the European Union and UNRWA condemned it.

Sources and references

1. “Weekly Report on Israeli Human Rights Violations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories,” Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, 13 March 2003.
2. “Israeli Occupation Forces Kill 11 Palestinian Civilians in Jabalia Refugee Camp,” MIFTAH, 6 March 2003.
3. “Chronological Review of Events Relating to the Question of Palestine: March 2003,” Division for Palestinian Rights, United Nations.