Rafah Massacre | 2004

Between 18 and 24 May 2004 the Israeli occupation army carried out an operation it called “Rainbow” in Rafah, in the south of the Gaza Strip, storming the Tel al-Sultan neighborhood and the Brazil and Salam neighborhoods with tanks, bulldozers and helicopters. In one week 44 Palestinians were killed, 18 of them children, and 400 homes housing more than four thousand people were demolished. On 19 May helicopters and tanks shelled a peaceful march of thousands of children, women and elderly people heading to besieged Tel al-Sultan. [1] [2]

This article tells the story of the Rafah massacres of May 2004: the storming of Tel al-Sultan, the shelling of the march, the hospital whose morgue overflowed with the dead, and the home demolitions, along with the differences between sources over the figures.

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The Rafah massacres of 2004 at a glance

Item	Details
Date	18–24 May 2004, preceded by attacks from 12 May [1] [3]
Place	Rafah, especially the Tel al-Sultan, Brazil and Salam neighborhoods [3]
Operation	“Rainbow” [1]
Killed	44 during the operation, 18 of them children; about 59 since 12 May [1] [4]
The 19 May march	8 killed according to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, about 50 wounded [2]
Homes	400 homes demolished, 117 of them completely, home to 4,171 people [1]
International response	UN Security Council Resolution 1544 (19 May 2004) condemned the killing of civilians and the demolition of homes [4]

Background: Rafah in the Second Intifada

Rafah, on the Egyptian border, was one of the Gaza Strip’s towns most exposed to demolitions and incursions during the Second Intifada. Over four years the occupation demolished more than 2,500 homes in the Strip, nearly two-thirds of them in Rafah, and about 16,000 of its residents, more than a tenth of them, lost their homes. [3]

In May 2004 the demolitions peaked: 298 homes in Rafah in a single month, more than in any month since the start of the intifada. [3] After the incursion into the “Block O” and Qishta areas on 12 May, in which 88 homes were demolished and about 15 Palestinians were killed, [3] “Operation Rainbow” began on 18 May, the occupation’s widest operation in the area since the start of the intifada. [5] [1] Israeli defense minister Shaul Mofaz said the operations were “open-ended.” [5]

The storming of Tel al-Sultan: 18 May

At dawn on 18 May 2004 occupation forces stormed the Tel al-Sultan neighborhood in western Rafah, after heavy shelling of residents' homes by tanks and helicopters. [5] At about 4 a.m. a helicopter fired a missile at a young man near the Bilal Ben Rabah mosque, then fired two more missiles at the civilians who rushed to help him, killing five of them instantly, among them two brothers, and a father and his son. [2]

Seven other civilians were killed inside their homes, among them two children aged ten and fourteen, and their bodies remained in the houses until evening because occupation forces prevented ambulances from reaching them, and even fired on them, forcing the crews of four ambulances to abandon them and flee. [2] [5] Electricity and water to the neighborhood were cut, and Rafah was isolated from the rest of the Strip. [2] By that evening the death toll had reached 20, with more than 30 wounded. [5]

On the morning of 19 May the neighborhood's males aged 16 to 40 were ordered to leave their homes carrying white flags and gather at schools; four civilians were killed before they arrived, among them a thirteen-year-old boy, and the others were detained, beaten and interrogated until evening. [2]

The shelling of the march: 19 May

On the afternoon of 19 May, at about 2:10 p.m., a peaceful march of thousands of residents, children, women and elderly people, set out for the besieged Tel al-Sultan neighborhood in solidarity with its people. About 500 meters from the neighborhood's entrance, an Israeli helicopter fired a missile into the crowd, while tanks fired shells and machine guns at the same time. [2]

Eight civilians were killed according to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, the youngest aged ten, and about 50 others were wounded, ten of them critically. [2] Other accounts give 9 or 10 killed, [4] while the circulating text states that the toll rose to 12, and that the helicopters fired four missiles and the tanks six shells.

On the same day the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1544, condemning “the killing of Palestinian civilians and the demolition of homes.” [4]

The hospital and the vegetable refrigerator

The wounded were taken to Abu Yousef al-Najjar Hospital, the only hospital in Rafah, which was overwhelmed with the dead and wounded. The morgue could no longer hold the bodies, and the hospital’s administration was forced to put them in a vegetable refrigerator and in neighboring shops. [2]

The home demolitions

According to the Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, occupation forces demolished 400 homes during “Operation Rainbow,” 117 of them completely, home to 4,171 people. [1] In the week of 13–19 May alone, at least 105 homes were demolished in Rafah, leaving 245 families of 1,464 people homeless, along with 23 shops, and two mosques were badly damaged by shelling. [2]

The destruction reached the Brazil neighborhood, where on 21 May Rafah’s only zoo was destroyed, along with about 60 homes completely and 35 partly demolished in the area. [4] Human Rights Watch estimates that 166 homes were destroyed in “Operation Rainbow” alone. [3]

The toll: what do the sources say?

Source	Period	Killed
Al Mezan Center for Human Rights	18–24 May	44, 18 of them children [1]
Human Rights Watch	18–24 May	32 civilians, 10 of them children, and 12 armed men [3]
Human Rights Watch and Al Mezan	12–24 May	About 59 [4]
Al Jazeera Net	18 May	20, with more than 30 wounded [5]

Source	Period	Killed
Circulating text (site entry)	18–20 May	56, with 150 wounded

The differences in the figures stem from the different periods the sources cover: some count the days of the operation from 18 to 24 May, some add the attacks of 12–15 May, and some cover only the first days. But all agree that most of the victims were civilians, and that a large number of them were children.

Read about the Zionist massacres against the Palestinian people, and the Rafah "Black Friday" massacre in 2014.

Conclusion

In a single week of May 2004, 44 Palestinians were killed in Rafah, 18 of them children; 400 homes were demolished over their families' heads or before their eyes; a march of children and women in solidarity with their besieged neighbors was shelled; and the bodies of the dead were laid in a vegetable refrigerator because the hospital's morgue was full. It was not a passing incident, but the peak of years in which Rafah was demolished home by home.

Frequently asked questions about the Rafah massacres of 2004

When did the Rafah massacres of 2004 take place?

They took place during the Israeli "Operation Rainbow" in Rafah between 18 and 24 May 2004, preceded by attacks from 12 May.

How many people were killed in Operation Rainbow in Rafah?

According to Al Mezan, 44 Palestinians were killed during the operation, 18 of them children, and about 59 since 12 May.

What happened at the Rafah march on 19 May 2004?

An Israeli helicopter and tanks shelled a peaceful march of thousands of residents heading to the besieged Tel al-Sultan neighborhood; 8 were killed according to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, and about 50 were wounded.

How many homes were demolished in Rafah in May 2004?

According to Al Mezan, 400 homes were demolished during Operation Rainbow, 117 of them completely; Human Rights Watch puts the number of homes demolished in Rafah in all of May 2004 at 298.

Why were the bodies of the dead put in a vegetable refrigerator?

Because the morgue at Abu Yousef al-Najjar Hospital, the only hospital in Rafah, was full, and its administration was forced to put the bodies in a vegetable refrigerator and in neighboring shops.

Sources and references

Arabic-language sources are listed with translated titles.

1. “Operation Rainbow: A Report on Human Rights Violations Perpetrated by the Israeli Occupation Forces in Rafah, from 18 to 24 May 2004,” Al Mezan Center for Human Rights.
2. “Weekly Report on Israeli Human Rights Violations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, 13–19 May 2004,” Palestinian Centre for Human Rights.
3. “Razing Rafah: Mass Home Demolitions in the Gaza Strip,” Human Rights Watch, October 2004.
4. “2004 Israeli operation in Rafah,” English Wikipedia (for comparison).
5. “Palestinians Bury the Martyrs of the Rafah Massacre,” Al Jazeera Net, 18 May 2004.