Beit Hanoun Massacre 2006: Shells Kill the Athamna Family Asleep

At dawn on Wednesday, 8 November 2006, Israeli occupation artillery fired 11 heavy shells at six homes in the town of Beit Hanoun, northern Gaza Strip, as their families slept. Eighteen Palestinians were killed according to Al Mezan, and 19 according to the UN, most of them of the Athamna family, including seven children. Fifty-three were wounded, including 25 children and 12 women. [1] [2] [3]

The United States vetoed a Security Council draft resolution condemning the massacre, while a UN mission led by Desmond Tutu found the shelling may constitute a war crime. [3] [2] It is one of the Zionist massacres against the Palestinian people.

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The Beit Hanoun massacre at a glance

Item	Details
Date	Dawn on Wednesday, 8 November 2006, around 5:30 [1]
Place	A residential neighbourhood of Beit Hanoun, northern Gaza Strip [1] [4]
Perpetrator	Israeli occupation army artillery [1] [2]
Weapons	11 heavy artillery shells on six homes [1]
Killed	18 per Al Mezan, 19 per the UN, most of the Athamna family, including 7 children and 4 women [1] [2] [3]
Wounded	53, including 25 children and 12 women [1]
UN position	Desmond Tutu’s mission: the shelling may constitute a war crime [2]

The massacre: shells on sleeping families

The massacre came one day after occupation forces redeployed around Beit Hanoun following an incursion into the town. At about 5:30 a.m., 11 heavy artillery shells fell on six neighbouring homes as their families slept. [1]

Saad Athamna, who lost three sons and two grandchildren, said: “Israel killed my children while I was praying the morning prayer.” His daughter Ilham, then 21, described seeing her siblings “cut into pieces on the ground.” [4]

The Athamna family

Most of the dead were of the extended Athamna family; according to Al Mezan, 16 of the eighteen were from this family. [1] The Mail & Guardian reports that 14 of the dead were women and children. [4]

A year and a half later the family had received nothing but a monthly stipend from the Palestinian Authority for each of the dead. The household of Saad Athamna had shrunk from more than thirty relatives to ten. His relative Majdi Athamna said: “Since that day we’ve received nothing.” [4]

The “technical failure” excuse

Israel admitted responsibility for the shelling but attributed it to a “technical failure.” [2] [4] In February 2008 the occupation army announced there were no grounds for a criminal investigation or the prosecution of any soldier, claiming the fire was based on “credible and specific intelligence information” and aimed at a point 450 metres from the edge of town, and that the homes were hit “by mistake” due to “a rare and severe failure in the artillery fire control system.” [4]

The UN mission criticized this as a “largely secret internal military investigation.” [2]

The US veto

On 11 November 2006 Arab states put before the Security Council a draft resolution condemning the Israeli attack that killed 19 Palestinian civilians, including seven children and four women, and also condemning rocket fire into Israel. Ten states voted in favour and four abstained, and the United States used its veto to defeat it. [3]

US Ambassador John Bolton called the draft “biased against Israel and politically motivated.” Palestinian government spokesman Ghazi Hamad said the veto was a “green light to Israel” to commit more massacres. [3]

Desmond Tutu’s mission

The Human Rights Council dispatched a high-level fact-finding mission led by South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Israel refused him a visa, so he entered Gaza through the Rafah crossing in late May 2008 and visited the Athamna home. [4] “This is not something you would want to wish on your worst enemy,” Tutu said. [4]

The mission submitted its final report on 1 September 2008, concluding that, absent a well-founded explanation from the Israeli military, “there is a possibility

that the shelling of Beit Hanoun constituted a war crime.” It recommended that Israel pay “adequate compensation without delay” to the victims, hold an independent and impartial investigation, and make reparation to the Beit Hanoun community through a memorial or health facility. [2] On 24 September 2008 the Human Rights Council endorsed the report by 32 votes. [2]

Conclusion

The Athamna family went to sleep in their homes on the night of 8 November 2006 and were woken at dawn by artillery shells that killed 18 of them, seven children among them. The occupation then called the massacre a “technical failure,” Washington blocked its condemnation, and the UN’s recommendations for compensation and accountability were ignored. The survivors, as they say, have received nothing.

Frequently asked questions about the 2006 Beit Hanoun massacre

When did the 2006 Beit Hanoun massacre take place?

At dawn on Wednesday, 8 November 2006, at about 5:30.

How many people were killed in the 2006 Beit Hanoun massacre?

18 according to Al Mezan and 19 according to the UN, most of the Athamna family, including seven children; 53 were wounded.

How did the occupation justify the Beit Hanoun massacre?

It blamed “a rare and severe failure in the artillery fire control system” and refused to open a criminal investigation.

What did the United States do after the massacre?

It vetoed a Security Council draft resolution condemning the massacre on 11 November 2006.

What did Desmond Tutu’s mission conclude?

That the shelling may have constituted a war crime, and it recommended compensation for the victims and an independent investigation.

Sources and references

1. “IOF Perpetrate Mass Murder in Beit Hanoun Today; 18 Palestinians Killed in Their Sleep,” Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, 8 November 2006.
2. Division for Palestinian Rights Monthly Bulletin, Vol. XXXI, No. 9 (September 2008): final report of the high-level fact-finding mission to Beit Hanoun, United Nations.
3. “US Vetoes Beit Hanoun Resolution,” Al Jazeera English, 12 November 2006.
4. “Israel Killed My Children,” Mail & Guardian, 3 June 2008.