Al-Bureij Camp Massacre 1953: Bombs on Sleeping Refugees

On the night of 28 August 1953 Unit 101 of the Israeli occupation army, led by Ariel Sharon, infiltrated al-Bureij refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip. Its men threw bombs through the windows of huts where refugees were sleeping and then shot at those who fled, killing 20 refugees and wounding 62, according to the United Nations. [1] [2]

The al-Bureij massacre was one of Unit 101's first crimes, seven weeks before the Qibya massacre, and it is one of the Zionist massacres against the Palestinian people. [1] [2]

Contents

1. The al-Bureij camp massacre at a glance
2. Al-Bureij camp
3. Unit 101 and Ariel Sharon
4. The massacre: the night of 28 August 1953
5. The toll: what do the sources say?
6. The United Nations position
7. Frequently asked questions
8. Sources and references

The al-Bureij camp massacre at a glance

Item	Details
Date	The night of 28 August 1953 [1] [3]
Place	Al-Bureij refugee camp, central Gaza Strip, about two kilometres from the armistice line [1]

Item	Details
Perpetrator	Unit 101 of the occupation army, led by Ariel Sharon [2] [3] [4]
Method	Bombs thrown through the windows of huts where refugees slept, then gunfire at those who fled [1]
Killed	20 according to the UN, with estimates as high as 43 or 50 [1] [2] [4]
Wounded	62, of them 27 seriously [1]
UN position	The Mixed Armistice Commission held armed Israelis responsible, and Bennike called it “a ruthless reprisal raid” [1]

Al-Bureij camp

Al-Bureij is a Palestinian refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip, run by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), about two kilometres west of the armistice line. [1] Its people were refugees driven from their villages in the 1948 Nakba, and in 1953 they were living in huts. [1]

Unit 101 and Ariel Sharon

The occupation formed Unit 101 after the 1948 war to attack those it called “infiltrators”; nicknamed “the Avengers,” it was commanded by Ariel Sharon. Palestinian researcher Salman Abu Sitta argues that the unit was set up to confront the refugees trying to return to their villages and land. [2]

The massacre: the night of 28 August 1953

On the night of 28 August 1953 Unit 101 gunmen attacked al-Bureij camp. According to the report of the UN Truce Supervision Organization, “bombs were thrown through the windows of huts in which refugees were sleeping and, as they fled, they were attacked by small arms and automatic weapons.” [1]

Once detected, the force stormed through the camp and out the other side, amid unarmed refugees. [5] Among the survivors was Mohammad Nabahin, then two

years old. His mother ran back to save him and was hit; she threw him to the ground behind her before she died. [2]

The occupation government officially denied responsibility, claiming that "volunteers" and kibbutz members had carried out the attack on their own initiative. [5]

The toll: what do the sources say?

Source	Toll
UN Truce Supervision Organization report	20 killed, 27 seriously wounded, 35 less seriously wounded [1]
Al Jazeera Net massacres list	20 killed [3]
Al Jazeera English, and Azmi Bishara	43 killed, including 7 women [2] [5]
Arabi21	At least 20, with other sources putting the toll at no fewer than 50 [4]

This article adopts the UN toll: 20 killed and 62 wounded.

The United Nations position

The Egyptian–Israeli Mixed Armistice Commission held an emergency meeting and adopted, by majority vote, a resolution holding "a group of armed Israelis" responsible for the attack. [1]

On 27 October 1953 the UNTSO Chief of Staff, General Vagn Bennike, presented the massacre to the Security Council alongside the Qibya massacre, saying that "a likely explanation is that it was a ruthless reprisal raid." [1]

Al-Bureij was not the occupation's last crime in the Strip; it was followed by the first Gaza massacre of 1955.

Conclusion

On a summer night in 1953, Unit 101 under Ariel Sharon threw bombs at refugees sleeping in their huts in al-Bureij camp, then hunted them down with gunfire, killing at least 20 and wounding 62. Its victims were refugees who had been driven from their villages only five years earlier. Decades later, the unit’s commander became the occupation’s prime minister.

Frequently asked questions about the al-Bureij camp massacre

When did the al-Bureij camp massacre take place?

It took place on the night of 28 August 1953.

Who carried out the al-Bureij camp massacre?

It was carried out by Unit 101 of the Israeli occupation army, led by Ariel Sharon.

How many people were killed in the al-Bureij camp massacre?

20 killed and 62 wounded according to the UN, with other estimates as high as 43 or 50 killed.

How was the al-Bureij camp massacre carried out?

Bombs were thrown through the windows of huts where refugees slept, and those who fled were shot with small arms and automatic weapons.

What did the United Nations say about the al-Bureij massacre?

The Mixed Armistice Commission held armed Israelis responsible, and General Bennike told the Security Council it was “a ruthless reprisal raid.”

Sources and references

Arabic-language sources are listed with translated titles.

1. Security Council, verbatim record of the 630th meeting (S/PV.630), report of UNTSO Chief of Staff Vagn Bennike, 27 October 1953.
2. “Sharon through Palestinian Eyes,” Al Jazeera English, 14 April 2006.
3. “Israeli Massacres against the Palestinian People,” Al Jazeera Net, 3 October 2004.
4. “Israel’s Wars on Gaza since 1948,” Arabi21, 22 December 2023.
5. Azmi Bishara, “Who Is Ariel Sharon?,” Al-Ahram Weekly, republished by Countercurrents, 9 September 2003.