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The language of terror 2.0

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

One week ago the US used its obnoxiously redundant veto power in the Security Council to block a resolution condemning Israel's recent bloodbath in Beit Hanoun, Gaza. The American representative to the United Nations, John Bolton, declared that it was obvious the resolution would never see the light of day since it did not "display an even-handed characterisation of the recent events in Gaza, nor does it advance the cause of Israeli-Palestinian peace". Double talk is becoming a frighteningly popular American export. Even though the resolution was amended to include a condemnation of Palestinian rocket fire into Israeli settlements, the indignant Mr Bolton complained that it was "biased against Israel and politically motivated". I'll ignore the obvious problem with that last statement for a moment; meanwhile let's break down Mr Bolton's drivel for the rest of the coherent speaking world.

The resolution, which called for Israel to withdraw the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) from the Occupied Territories along with the setting up of a fact finding commission, came as a result of another round of Israel's pornographic violence towards the Palestinian people. On Friday, November 3, the IDF opened fire on a group of elderly women clad in black abayas who had gathered around a mosque in the Northern Gaza city of Beit Hanoun acting as a human shield. They had come to protect a group of young men holed up inside the mosque, offering their bodies as protective armour. The IDF calls those men "gunmen" and worse " Hamas sponsored terrorists". The women call them their sons. The IDF opened fire on the women and killed a forty-year-old mother, and wounded ten others. Israeli soldiers had entered the town that previous Wednesday; they had come on an "operation" to halt locally manufactured Palestinian rockets, known as Qassams, from being fired into the civilised heart of Israeli settlements and suburbs.

Let's talk about "even handed" for a moment: the Human Rights Watch, no best friend of the Palestinian cause, estimates that in the past year the IDF has fired approximately 15,000 rounds of ammunition at Palestinians. The Palestinians have fired about 1,700 rounds back. Yes, Bolton is right, that is not even handed, not at all. Furthermore, the organisation concluded that in the past two years 14 Israeli civilians/settlers were killed by Qassam rockets fired from Palestine. However, in four weeks time, from June till July of this year 126 Palestinians, 29 of who were children, were killed by IDF "operations". The UN estimates that close to 500 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza since this June. A young man speaking to London's Independent said of the women's solidarity with the men at the centre of the mosque standoff "More and more people will support the resistance. In the seventies there were 500 fighters. Now I think there are 10,000. If this goes on there will be 100,000."

If only the Palestinians were doing as much as the Israelis are to "advance the cause of Israeli-Palestinian peace" perhaps all these people would stop getting killed said exasperated Israeli officials. Fast forward five days from the Beit Hanoun mosque assault: on November 8 Israel launched a pre dawn artillery attack on the people of Beit Hanoun, using ten to fifteen 155mm shells, killing 19 civilians -- the highest number of "collateral damage" (translation: unnecessary civilian deaths) massacred by the IDF since the start of their military blitz on the Occupied Territories following the abduction of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Ten children are included in the second Beit Hanoun casualties, and thirteen members of the dead belonged to one family. Fifty more civilians were critically wounded.

The spin launched by Israeli government officials in the aftermath of the slaughter takes the language of terror to an entirely new level of monstrosity. Mark Regev, the omnipresent Australian accented government spokesperson, appeared on CNN and called the "operation" an essential right of Israel's "self defence". When Israel kills, it is always self defence. When Israelis are killed, it is terrorism. Worse, it's reminiscent of Nazi terrorism. Oye ve.

Israel's Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni continued unabashedly. Israel has no interest in "harming innocent people" he protested, but -- and here's the rub -- "in the course of fighting, regrettable things happen". Cue shoulder shrug and deafening silence. Why hold the Israelis responsible for tiny mistakes? Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who I'm sure found the US veto of the Beit Hanoun resolution very satisfactory, claimed that the strike on a patently evident civilian area was the result of a technical failure. Cue another round of shoulder shrugging. "Incidents like this happen" he said.

Since when is 19 dead civilians an "incident"? Olmert is not alone in paraphrasing -- the UN resolution was not passed forward in the Security Council last week until the word "massacre" was erased and replaced with the term "military operation". What is it with these people and semantics? A military operation does not necessarily end in carnage, but a massacre always does. Does calling the deaths of the Beit Hanoun civilians a massacre mean the resolution is biased against Israel or does it simply involve a basic telling of the facts? Is it politically motivated to call Israel's "operations" state sponsored terrorism? Or is it a pretty obvious round up of the ground reality?

There have been 71 resolutions brought forward against Israel in the Security Council, more than any another member state. Every US veto used at the Security Council roundtable since 1986 has been to protect Israel. America's actions at the height of this recent bout of Israeli terror are "less than politically astute" (stupid), and perhaps they and the Israelis think that they can count on the positive effect of their "verbal communication" (nonsense) to calm the storm (global hatred) brewing against them. But they're wrong.

Rosa Luxembourgh, the famous Jewish Marxist theorist and activist, said of a revolution's success "We will be victorious if we have not forgotten how to learn". It's a struggle, but we will resist the mental temptation to give in to CNN's constant desensitisation of war and violence. We won't forget what we have seen and heard, no matter how repetitive it becomes. We're listening and we're watching. And most importantly, we're reading in between the lines.