



The Atrocity Exhibition

THE MERE THOUGHT of emaciated children clinging to the corpse of their mother for hour after hour while Israeli troops prowl the dark ruins chills the blood. There is nothing acceptable about such a thought or such a reality. This is the view of Navi Pillay, the UN high commissioner for human rights, of a host of other humanitarian organizations, and of the emerging body of international law concerning the conduct of soldiers engaged in war fighting. The soldiers are responsible for the safety and welfare of civilians unfortunate enough to cross their path. The Israeli Defence Force, or the Hamas fighters, whoever had the tactical advantage, should have rescued these children and the surviving adults. This much is clear.

Reports of circumstances like these, of the shelling of schools, attacks on those rushing the wounded and dying to hospital, and the bombing of residential districts and markets, have dominated news coverage of the war in Gaza. Internet, television, and newspaper reporting, using film and information garnered by residents and the local employees of aid agencies, have shaped this humanitarian focus. Consequently there has been little detailed discussion of the progress of the fighting or of the specific military objectives of either side – all attention has been upon the suffering of the civilian population. Reports of this suffering have gone on to mobilise the outrage of demonstrators throughout the world and has resulted

in elaborate apologies and expressions of understanding for the actions and policies of Hamas.

Meanwhile Israeli ministers have denied all responsibility for mass killings by insisting that Hamas is using the population of the Gaza Strip as a “human shield”. In this way, the Israelis with, it must be said, little prospect of success hope to join the rest of the world in concentrating upon the suffering, which according to Ehud Barak and Tzipi Livni, is the exclusive responsibility of Hamas.

Israel also blames Hamas for the destruction of Gaza’s economy: since June 2007 when Hamas took control of the territory 40,000 farmers and 70,000 workers have lost their jobs. According to the World Bank, 98 per cent of Gaza’s industry was shut *before* the current war broke out. It was, Livni argues, Hamas that forced Israel to destroy Gaza’s economy. In this gruesome game of denying responsibility Israel’s actions are the responsibility of Hamas, while Hamas only fires rockets indiscriminately at civilians because Israel compels it to do so. Both sides are deeply concerned with humanitarian issues, both sides would like, if only they had the choice, to avoid civilian casualties.

However, atrocities are an integral part of war. You cannot fight wars without atrocities. Drunk, drugged or traumatised soldiers are, no matter how alert the military command, going to rape, torture and murder, enemy soldiers and civilians. When these entirely predictable events are revealed by the humanitarian focus of the modern media all and sundry will express shock and horror at man’s inhumanity to man. The tired old indignation will be dusted down and we will all be surprised and outraged all over again. Although it is well known that the brutality and lawlessness inherent in wars is the principal reason for avoiding them.

Then, there is the collateral damage: the accidental or unintended killing of large numbers of ordinary men, women, and children. Sometimes, of course, these mass killings are entirely deliberate – witness the destruction of German cities during the forties – but

justified by including the enemy's civilians as "legitimate targets". This kind of thought is what allows Hamas to fire rockets at will into Israel. Then there are the apparently unintended killings associated with surgical airstrikes and carefully targeted artillery and tank fire. These killings may be unintended, but they are most assuredly not unexpected. Israel knows only too well that bombing towns and cities, shelling city blocks and refugee camps will slaughter very large numbers of women, children, adolescents, and old men, not to mention the young men, who are of course fair game in any war.

Despite all this absurd argy bargy about "proportionality" it is quite clear that Hamas would inflict existential damage upon Israel if only it was more efficient and better supplied. Most of the people who dwell upon demands for proportionality are implicitly calling upon the IDF to keep their killing roughly in line with that of Hamas. That this would make no military sense does not detain them because the concern of these peace mongers is purely humanitarian – not unnaturally, they want atrocities kept to a minimum. At any rate they would rather Israel did not carry them out.

This focus upon civilian casualties has resulted in an almost exclusive focus upon Israel's culpability. A bitter historical irony is alleged where it is said that Israel has turned Gaza into a "concentration camp". According to the Vatican's Cardinal Renato Martino, the Gaza Strip increasingly resembles a concentration camp; some have even compared it to the Warsaw Ghetto. This is where the focus upon misery leads us. One is tempted to ask the Cardinal where the train tracks from Gaza to Treblinka and Auschwitz are; where are the daily selections for the gas chambers set up by the IDF for the systematic destruction of the Palestinian population?

This search for entirely inappropriate historical parallels in the fight against Israel has led many people on the left to compare the fight against Zionism to the fight against Apartheid in South Africa. Naomi

Klein is even calling for a boycott. She apparently believes that it was the worldwide boycott of South African goods that resulted in the surrender of the Apartheid state to Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress. This rather naïve view seems to ignore the state of virtual civil war, which existed in South Africa after 1985 on the one hand, and the collapse of communism between 1989 and 1991 on the other, which made it both necessary and possible for De Klerk to surrender to the ANC without unduly empowering the South African Communist Party.

On top of gross political naivety, there is another problem with Naomi's "Boycott Israel" plan – anti-Semitism. Such a boycott would inevitably spread to a boycott of Jewish firms and businesses throughout the world on the extended basis that their owners are Zionists who actively support Israel. This kind of boycott is already in place in Iran and throughout the Arab world. It is also canvassed by a number of leftist and Islamist groups in Britain. To extend it any further is folly of the worse sort.

The reason for the present war is the refusal of Israel and Hamas to recognise the legitimacy of each other's existence. Israel's refusal to end the occupation, remove the settlements, and return to its 1967 frontier, is based upon the entirely reasonable fear that Palestinian political organizations and their allies in Lebanon, in Tehran and Damascus, want to destroy the Jewish state. This fear has led Israel, perhaps inevitably, into the wholesale oppression of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza – this oppression in turn guarantees the existence of a more or less permanent armed Palestinian insurrection. It is a malign circle of murder and oppression that only big powers can break. The solution is not boycotts, or wars without end, but the recognition of two independent states, whose security is mutually guaranteed by each other, and underpinned by European and American money and weapons.