

# Plight of the Rohingya: Ethnic Cleansing, Mass Rape and Monsoons on the Way

Dennis J. Bernstein spoke with filmmaker and human rights activist, Jeanne Hallacy, just back with horror stories from Myanmar and the massive Rohingya camps of over 700,000 in neighboring Bangladesh.

**By Dennis J Bernstein**



The English-language *Bangkok Post* reported on May 5 that the Rohingya refugees who return to Myanmar will be safe, according to the military there, as long as they stay confined to the camps being set up for them. Myanmar's current commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, told a visiting delegation from the UN Security Council "there is no need to be worried about their security if they stay in the areas designated for them."

But then General Min referred to the Rohingya as "Bengalis", perpetuating the belief—and antagonism against them inside Myanmar—that the Rohingya are foreigners to the country, who are lying and exaggerating their suffering to get sympathy from the rest of the world. "Bengalis will never say that they arrive there happily. They will get sympathy and rights only if they say that they face a lot of hardships and persecution," he said.

For its part, the UN says the refugee camps in Myanmar, referred to by the general, are not fit or safe for the arrival of hundred of thousands of Rohingya, who have already suffered from the worst kinds of brutality imaginable, including the burning down of entire villages, mass rape and murder.

In fact, it is common knowledge that the suffering and outright persecution of the Rohingya and other minorities has gone on non-stop for decades.

On May 3, I caught up with noted filmmaker and human rights activist, Jeanne Hallacy, just back from Myanmar and the massive camps in neighboring Bangladesh. Hallacy has worked in the region for many years, and her films have documented the suffering of various minorities in Burma over several decades. She was on her way to a seminar on the situation in Myanmar, and to preview her new short film that documents how the military in Myanmar have been using rape as a tool of war. She was extremely concerned that the sprawling refugee camps now face the added dangers of a cholera epidemic and the yearly flooding that results from the monsoon rains.

AP reported on May 2: "The Rohingya refugees have escaped soldiers and gunfire. They have escaped mobs that stormed through their villages, killing and raping and burning. They have fled Myanmar, their homeland, to find shelter in sprawling refugee camps in neighboring Bangladesh. Now there's a new danger: rain. The annual monsoon will soon sweep through the immense camps where some 700,000 Rohingya Muslims have lived since last year...The clusters of bamboo and plastic huts, built along endless waves of steep hills, are now facing a deluge that, in an average year, dumps anywhere from 40 to 60 centimeters (16 to 24 inches) of rain per month."

Hallacy was joined in the interview by student human rights activist, Miu, who is working with human rights groups at UC Berkeley to demonstrate the role that social media—Facebook in particular—has been playing to facilitate the suffering and mass rape that has been a part of the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya from Myanmar.

**Dennis Bernstein:** Those who have fled Myanmar continue to face a horrific situation in exile. The folks back in Myanmar say they are welcome to come back but the actions do not support the words. Please give us an update, both in terms of what is happening in exile and what is happening in the country.

Later we will talk about the consistent use of rape by the Burmese military as a tool of war. We are also going to talk about how Facebook is fueling these kinds of slaughters. But please take a moment to give us an update on the situation on the ground.

**Jeanne Hallacy:** The situation of the Rohingya is one of the most serious refugee crises in the world. When we last met, I hadn't yet gone to the camps. This mass exodus has now seen a million Rohingya flee from Burma to the camps in Bangladesh. I have been doing this kind of work for many decades, but when I stood on the precipice of this camp and saw as far as the eye could see the incredible squalor of thousands and thousands of people crammed into this small place, it just took my breath away.

It wasn't just the scale, it was the fact that when you walked around the camp, all of the adults had this deep sense of suffering and trauma because they had experienced such heinous human rights abuses before they fled. It was unlike any refugee camp I have ever seen in my work as a journalist.

**DB:** Would you share with us some of the stories that stay with you, so we can keep a human face on this?

**JH:** We have decided to focus on one of the human rights abuses that we know have been documented by the Burmese Army clearance operations that took place in

August of last year after a group of self-described Rohingya militants attacked thirty Burmese border posts. The gravity of the response was completely out of proportion to the attacks. This is what led to this massive exodus which, according to UN officials, was one of the largest exoduses of people that they have ever seen.

Human Rights Watch has satellite footage which shows the complete destruction of over 350 villages that were razed to the ground. Women were forced to stand in the river as their children were ripped from their arms and killed in front of them. Girls as young as seven years old were survivors of sexual violence, some of whom were killed afterwards. People were arbitrarily detained and killed. Unimaginable human rights abuses were carried out by the Burmese, leading to this exodus.

Within this spectrum of horror, we decided to focus on the issue of sexual violence. We found it outrageous that those who have doubted the accuracy of Rohingya refugees have said that the young women and girls who said that they were raped were lying and that they were paid to give false testimony.

**DB:** I want to remind people that, together with Leslie Kean, I reported on this use of rape as a tool of war by the Burmese army in a cover story in *The Nation* magazine in 1996. At the time, Aung San Suu Kyi expressed her concern about that when she was in solitary confinement. She has been silent since, but this has been going on and the military denied it then as they are denying it now.

**JH:** In fact, this abuse by the Burmese military has been documented by ethnic women's groups in exile. We are focusing on these Rohingya girls in order to make a parallel to the continued use of sexual violence in areas where conflict continues. It is not just the Rohingya who have been targeted by the Burmese military. Just this week, in Northern Kachin State, there were renewed attacks by the Burmese military and there was a report of a woman in her seventies being raped. The Burmese military have gotten away with this for decades with impunity.

**DB:** The United Nations took some action today [May 3]. Could you talk about that? I believe Aung San Suu Kyi actually said a few words, but she won't say the word "Rohingya."

**JH:** Unfortunately, the word "Rohingya" has become something of a lightning rod. Even in a tea shop in Rangoon you don't dare say it, it is that inflammatory. The Islamophobia which is sweeping Burma now is fueled by this ultra-nationalist, right-wing fervor which sees Buddhism as the national religion and any others as actually threatening the state of Burma.

Aung San Suu Kyi issued a statement [on May 1] which was the first positive sign from the government. Her statement said that it was time for the Burmese government to work in partnership with the United Nations Development Program and the UNHCR.

Very importantly, the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights, Yanghee Lee, has repeatedly pointed out that there could be hallmarks of genocide in this. The United Nations has already clearly identified this as ethnic cleansing but the question as to whether genocide has taken place remains to be investigated.

Unfortunately, Yanghee Lee was denied access to the country. This was a very serious obstacle to accepting the role of the United Nations in trying to understand the root causes of this conflict.

**DB:** How would you explain Aung San Suu Kyi's response to all of this?

**JH:** The military remain in firm control of three of the most important ministries in the country. They remain in economic power. And more importantly, 25% of parliament is appointed by the military. To enact any law you need 76% of parliamentary votes. So there can't be any real reform.

Aung San Suu Kyi is walking a tightrope in this political transition. This crisis was an opportunity for her to put her hat back on as a human rights icon and create a moral compass. If she spoke out, her countrymen would follow. If she reminded people of the tenets of Buddhism, including loving kindness and compassion, I believe it would help reduce the hysterical hatred and racism.

**DB:** I want to bring you in, Miu, a student activist at UC Berkeley working with the Human Rights Center there. You are documenting the role that Facebook seems to be playing in perpetrating mass murder.

**Miu:** As you have both mentioned, there has been a history of discrimination against Rohingya in Myanmar. When we analyze this conflict, we have to ask "Why now?" Our team has discovered that, with the rise in tech accessibility after 2013, when the government ended its monopoly of internet access, penetration went from 4% to 90% in the country. This rise in tech accessibility has been linked with a rise in violence and a rise in hate speech online.

In Myanmar, Facebook is a form of news. The people there see Facebook as the truth. With the internet becoming accessible to the people so quickly, digital illiteracy is a massive problem within the country. People don't know how to recognize fake news and propaganda.

In many cases, incitement of hate speech online can lead to actual violence on the ground. We saw this in July 2014 when an unverified story that a Muslim tea shop owner raped a Buddhist employee circulated online. This post was then

promoted by Ashin Wirathu, the leader of the Buddhist Nationalist 969 movement, and led to riots where Muslim shop owners were targeted. Two people were killed and fourteen were injured.

Our team has also documented incidents of hate speech online by government officials, for example, in which they have referred to the Rohingya as "detestable human fleas." We actually gathered a post by the chief of command of the military saying "Race must be swallowed by another race."

**DB:** If that doesn't sound like ethnic cleansing and the beginning of a genocide, I don't know what does.

**Miu:** These posts show intent and knowledge, which becomes extremely important for the issue of accountability. Facebook has been used as a weapon in this conflict, to promote hate but also to deny accountability. Yanghee Lee said this March at the Human Rights Council that "Facebook has turned into a beast."

**DB:** Has Facebook been sympathetic?

**Miu:** Mark Zuckerberg has stated that what happened in Myanmar was a terrible tragedy and that Facebook needed to do more. A spokesperson has said that they are looking into the situation and that they promise to take down hate speech within 24 hours of posting and that they are developing a counter-speech campaign. But all of this is reactionary and it is not happening fast enough.

Unfortunately, we are not seeing major change. One form of change we are seeing is that these online companies are starting to realize that they do need to take down some content. But they are doing it in a way that is not helpful to human rights workers, who are trying to gather this content as evidence. Recently we have been seeing a lot of the footage of violence is being taken down by Facebook and YouTube. We need an inclusive conversation between human rights advocates and the tech companies to insure that useful information is stored while that which is harmful is taken down.

**DB:** Jeanne, if the policy continues, where are we headed?

**JH:** This is a dilemma facing the international community, from the United Nations to all the major NGOs who are providing the emergency humanitarian assistance to the displaced population in Bangladesh.

The Bengalese government cannot indefinitely host this number of people. It is already an impoverished nation with its own internal security issues brought about by a rise in Islamic fundamentalism. Sooner or later, some of this resentment will be turned on the refugees. We have seen indications of that already.

The question is where and when the Rohingya can go to a place of safe return with dignity. The offers by the Myanmar government to repatriate them and the agreement that they made with the Bangladeshi government to do so are hollow unless the root causes of the incredible oppression that the Rohingya have lived under for decades are addressed.

First and foremost is citizenship. Without citizenship so many things are inaccessible to you, from healthcare to education. But in the case of Rohingya, it involves restriction of movement. If you want to visit someone in a neighboring village, you have to get a letter of permission. If you need medical care outside of your village, you need a letter of permission. If you want to get married, you have to apply for permission. To repair your house or your mosque you need permission. All Rohingyas have been shut out of universities since the violence broke out in 2012.

Unless there is a comprehensive effort on the part of the Burmese government, working in partnership with agencies who have the knowledge and expertise to create an atmosphere where there is access to justice and equitable right to live on that land, then any terms of repatriation are premature at this stage.

The humanitarian crisis now is especially grave because of the monsoon season. The monsoon season in Bangladesh is very fierce. This camp is built on a kind of sandy silt. There is no protection against the winds and the rains. There are fears of mudslides, involving a high level of disease risk. So it is a race against the clock, even in the short term. In the longer term, unless there is a human rights prism through which the situation can be seen, any sustainable solution is really premature to consider.

I wanted to add to what Miu was saying in terms of expressing to people the atmosphere inside Burma now, not just among the refugees in Bangladesh. Many human rights advocates in Burma who have dared to speak up on behalf of the Rohingya have themselves now been targeted by Facebook. People believe that members of the military are posing as civilians in fake profiles to carry out this vitriolic attack against any journalist or activist talking about the crisis in Rakhine state.

Two Reuters journalists, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, investigated one of the many massacres that took place during the military operations last year. They have been languishing in jail for five months, held without bail for allegedly divulging state secrets. A few of the officers at that massacre have been sentenced to ten years, whereas the two Reuters journalists who were reporting the massacre are facing fourteen years!

Under Aung San Suu Kyi's government, the number of cases of journalists being

harassed, intimidated, threatened, arrested or jailed under the telecommunications act has actually been higher than it was during the military regime. Another incredible colleague, Esther Htusan, the first ever Burmese journalist to win the Pulitzer Prize, had to flee the country for her life because they were threatening not only her but her family on Facebook. They actually said to people, if you see her in public, attack her or bring her to a police station. She was working for Associated Press. This is the kind of pressure the Burmese press have been put under for even reporting on the issue of the Rohingya. Facebook assists with this.

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## Protests Force Starbucks to Ditch ADL From Leading Anti-Racism Training

After an outcry over the inclusion of the Anti-Defamation League as a lead member of Starbucks’s anti-racism training, the ubiquitous coffee shop backed down, as Marjorie Cohn reports for Consortium News.

**By Marjorie Cohn** *Special to Consortium News*



After a video of the arrest of two African-American men sitting in Starbucks without buying anything went viral, Starbucks scheduled anti-racism training. But their inclusion of the Anti-Defamation League in the training provoked another outcry and Starbucks capitulated.

On April 12, Rashon Nelson and Donte Robinson were arrested for trespassing at a Philadelphia Starbucks. A manager called the police because the men, who had been in the coffee shop for just a few minutes, hadn’t bought anything.

Melissa DePino, a Starbucks customer who recorded the video of the arrest that went viral on social media, said, “These guys never raised their voices. They never did anything remotely aggressive . . . I was sitting close to where they were. Very close. They were not doing anything. They weren’t.”

In an attempt to avert a public relations disaster after the racist incident became public, Starbucks announced it would close most of its 8,000 locations on

May 29 for racial bias training.

But, adding insult to injury, Starbucks included the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), with its notorious history of racism, as a primary participant in the anti-racism training.

Community outrage at ADL's central role in the training was swift and strong. Starbucks demoted ADL to a consulting role, and named representatives of three prominent African-American-led civil rights organizations to lead the training.

### **ADL: "Anti-Muslim, Anti-Palestinian, Anti-Black and Anti-Activist"**

After Starbucks had initially announced the composition of its anti-racism trainers, there was a powerful backlash in the civil rights community against ADL's leadership role.

Tamika Mallory, co-chair of the Women's March and Black Lives Matter, called for a boycott of Starbucks. Mallory, a nationally prominent organizer for gun control and women's rights, and against police violence, is the 2018 recipient of the Coretta Scott King Legacy Award.

Mallory tweeted that Starbucks "is NOT serious about doing right by BLACK people!" because of the prominent role it gave ADL, which "is CONSTANTLY attacking black and brown people."

Cat Brooks, co-founder of the Anti Police-Terror Project, said she agrees with Mallory. "You can't be a piece of an anti-bias training when you openly support a racist, oppressive and brutal colonization of Palestine."

Linda Sarsour, also co-chair of the Women's March, wrote on Facebook that ADL is "an anti-Arab, anti-Palestinian organization that peddles Islamophobia and attacks America's prominent Muslim orgs and activists and supports/sponsors US law enforcement agents to travel and get trained by Israeli military."

Palestinian-American comedian, activist and professor Amer Zahr grew up in Philadelphia. Zahr told this reporter that ADL and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) "were the architects of the anti-Arab and anti-Islamic industry in America for the last 50 to 60 years."

Zahr said that "welcoming groups like ADL into the family of civil rights organizations . . . is a real slap in the face to Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims who have been the victims of ADL rhetoric for decades."

Asked to respond to Starbucks' decision, a spokesman for the ADL who was contacted refused to comment.



## Spied on Leftists

ADL was established in 1913 “to defend Jews, and later other minority groups from discrimination,” Robert I. Friedman wrote in 1993. It led the struggle against the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party, and supported the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. But in the late 1940s, “ADL spied on leftists and Communists, and shared investigative files with the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the FBI. The ADL swung sharply to the right during the Reagan administration, becoming a bastion of neoconservatism.”

In 1993, the San Francisco District Attorney released 700 pages of documents that implicated ADL in an extensive spying operation against US citizens who opposed Israel’s policies in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza, and apartheid in South Africa. ADL then passed the information to Israel’s Mossad and South African intelligence.

The documents revealed that ADL provided information to South African intelligence shortly before Chris Hanani was assassinated. Hanani was a leader of the African National Congress, which led the struggle against apartheid, and was considered the successor to Nelson Mandela. Hanani was killed soon after returning from a speaking tour in California, where he had been spied on by ADL.

Fifteen civil rights groups and seven individuals filed a federal lawsuit against ADL in 1993 for violation of their civil and privacy rights by spying on them. Six years later, federal Judge Richard Paez issued an injunction permanently enjoining ADL from illegally spying on Arab-American and other civil rights organizations.

But ADL’s hateful activities continue. Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) executive director Rebecca Vilkomerson said in an interview with Consortium News that ADL, which “calls itself a civil rights organization, is in truth playing a really damaging role in a number of communities.” She noted that ADL is “promoting and complicit in anti-Muslim, anti-Palestinian, anti-Black and anti-activist campaigns.”

Vilkomerson criticized ADL for honoring the St. Louis Police Department one year after their officers killed Michael Brown, an unarmed African-American man in Ferguson.

Arielle Klagsbrun of the St. Louis JVP explained, “The ADL’s side is the side of police. As someone whose family members are Holocaust survivors, the lessons I learned from the Holocaust for today are that black lives matter and that we must stand against systemic racism.”

Soffiyah Elijah, executive director of Alliance of Families for Justice, said in

an interview that if one were crafting a training program against anti-Semitism, you “wouldn’t go to the NAACP for sensitivity training,” adding, “as a Black person, I found [the inclusion of ADL] further insulting.”

Vilkomerson called ADL “one of the biggest purveyors” of exchanges between Israeli and US law enforcement, where American police go to Israel to learn “counter-terrorism” measures to be applied here. That encompasses “racial profiling, spying, mass surveillance and collective punishment.”

But “US police don’t really need a lesson in racism,” Vilkomerson added.

### **Starbucks Backs Down After Anti-ADL Backlash**

JVP circulated a petition against inclusion of ADL, which garnered 11,000 signatures in 72 hours. According to Vilkomerson, the “enormous outpouring” on Twitter of opposition to ADL’s initial central role in the training and the “week-long pushback,” including JVP’s petition, led Starbucks to back down.

Starbucks issued a statement identifying the leaders of the training as: Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of Equal Justice Initiative; Sherrilyn Ifill, president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund; and Heather McGhee, president of Demos, a civil rights organization.

The three leaders “will provide advice, counsel, connections to other experts, and recommendations to Starbucks for the May 29 training, which will launch the multiphase effort for the company.”

Starbucks said it “will also consult with a diverse array of organizations and civil rights experts – including The Anti-Defamation League, The Leadership on Civil and Human Rights, UnidosUS, Muslim Advocates, and representatives of LGBTQ groups, religious groups, people with disabilities, and others.”

JVP’s deputy director Ari Wohlfeiler stated in a press release:

Starbucks will never say it publicly, but because of the huge public outcry about the ADL’s unyielding pro-Israel position, their refusal to condemn police violence, their incessant Islamophobia, and the convergence of all those retrograde positions in their active facilitation of US/Israeli police exchange programs, Starbucks had no choice but to demote them.

It was an “excellent outcome,” Vilkomerson said.

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*general of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers and an advisory board member of Veterans for Peace. The second, updated edition of her book, Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral, and Geopolitical Issues, was recently published.*

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## Israelis Continue to Open Fire on Gaza Protestors: An Eyewitness Account

An Interview with Gaza-based Palestinian Journalist, Wafa Al-Udaini

By Dennis J Bernstein



According to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), the Palestinian death toll since March 30, 2018 “has risen to 33, including 4 children and 1 photojournalist, and the number of those wounded has risen to 2,436, including 410 children, 66 women, 22 journalists and 9 paramedics.”

There have been no Israeli casualties.

According to PCHR, on Friday, April 20th, Israeli snipers “killed 4 Palestinian civilians, including a child, and wounded 274 others, including 41 children, 6 women and 1 journalist, in addition to hundreds suffering tear gas inhalation, including PCHR’s fieldworkers who were documenting the Israeli forces’ suppression of the entirely peaceful demonstrations near the border fence with Israel, east of the Gaza Strip.”

PCHR maintains that “for the fourth week in a row and upon a decision by the Israeli highest military and political echelons, the Israeli forces used lethal force against the peaceful protesters, who did not pose any threat to the soldiers’ life.” There is a cell phone camera recording now being widely distributed that appears to show Israeli snipers and soldiers cheering as they gun down unarmed Palestinians fleeing in the distance.

On April 17th, I spoke with Gaza-based Palestinian Journalist Wafa Al-Udaini who has been an eyewitness to all the Gaza protests in the ongoing anti-occupation, Right to Return protests since late March. Al-Udaini’s friend and colleague, Yaser Murtaja, a photojournalist and camera person for a Gaza-based media production company was shot on April 6th by Israeli sharpshooters and died the next day of his wounds.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, “Pictures posted on social media by local journalists and witness testimony from local journalists show that Murtaja was wearing a bulletproof vest and helmet that were both clearly marked with the words “PRESS” when he was hit.”

Today I interview ths little brave man.He said,he went2 protest peacefully  
2get back occupied lands#GreatReturnMarch [pic.twitter.com/5RMUc9eGNg](https://pic.twitter.com/5RMUc9eGNg)

– Wafa A Al-Udaini (@wafa\_Gaza) [April 18, 2018](#)

In the following interview, Al-Udaini offers an eye-witness recounting of the initial protest in Gaza on March 30th, in which at least 18 protesters were killed by Israeli snipers and well over a thousand people were wounded.

**Dennis Bernstein:** We are going to hear now some eyewitness accounts, some very troubling testimony of the way in which Israeli snipers, from a long distance away, behind a fence and across a field, began to gun down hundreds of people, wounding over a thousand protesters and killing at least 18 Palestinians on the first day. It was truly horrifying.

Some people were protesting, some were praying, and others, like Wafa Al-Udaini, were sitting down for a meal during the long day of anti-occupation protests, when Israeli snipers opened fire and began to gun down unarmed Palestinians.

Wafa Al-Udaini, tell us a bit of your background and then tell us what you witnessed on March 30th and the other protest days that you were an eye-witness to.

**Wafa Al-Udaini:** I live here in the Gaza Strip. My grandparents were expelled from Beersheba by Israeli gangs in 1948. Now I live as a Palestinian refugee in the Gaza Strip. I work as a journalist for different websites and on radio. I am also an activist, the leader of a youth group here composed of students and journalists who work to present Palestinian issues to the world.

We were so excited about the Great March of Return protests, which began on the 13th of March. It was a peaceful and secular march, where all Palestinians, male and female, elderly and children, came to the border fence to resist peacefully. I took my family with me and we brought along something to eat and drink. We sat together and shared our food. We were asserting our right to demonstrate and reminding the world of our right to return to the land we occupied before we were driven from our homes. I brought my camera and intended to livestream the event. We were about 700 meters from the Israeli side.

**DB:** Could you talk about when you realized that the soldiers were opening fire on civilians? Were people around you being shot?

**WAU:** At the moment, I was interviewing people around me about what life was like before 1948, stories they had heard from their grandparents. Then suddenly I heard shots and I saw people running. I asked what was happening and they told me that the Israelis were opening fire. A man fleeing with his children told me some had been murdered. The Israelis began throwing teargas and they gunned down people who were fleeing.

**DB:** Let me explain to people that there is the border fence, which is electrified, and then there is a major piece of land between the fence and where the protest was happening. My understanding is that the soldiers were sharpshooters and they were picking people off from the other side of the fence.

**WAU:** Exactly. It had nothing to do with “defense,” because of the distance and because we were unarmed. They fired on women holding the Palestinian flag. This was their crime. Claims of self defense are just ludicrous.

**DB:** A friend of yours, a journalist, Yaser Murtaja, was gunned down on April 6th. I understand he was wearing his press vest, that clearly marked him as a journalist. He was gunned down and killed by Israeli snipers. Do you think he might have been shot *because* he was wearing his press vest, and the Israelis weren't crazy about their killing fields being broadcast around the world?

**WAU:** Yes. The Israelis are realizing that they can't continue to fool people indefinitely. This camera footage of all of this flies in the face of any claims that the Israeli army is acting in self defense. These on-the-ground images show Israeli propaganda for what it is.

**DB:** It appears they are willing to wipe out peaceful protesters while the rest of the world is watching, while the US government continues to provide them with arms, and while the Western corporate press works to bury the real story.

**Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of *Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom*. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net). You can get in touch with the author at [dbernstein@igc.org](mailto:dbernstein@igc.org).**

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## Likening Palestinians to Blades of Grass

**From the Archive:** As Israeli military has killed dozens of unarmed protesters

near the border at which they are fenced into Gaza, Israeli leaders may feel they are once again “mowing the grass” as Elizabeth Murray recalls in this updated piece originally published on November 16, 2012.

**By Elizabeth Murray** *Special to Consortium News*



In early 2010, one of Washington DC’s most prestigious think tanks was holding a seminar on the Middle East which included a discussion of Israel’s December 2008-January 2009 assault on Gaza which killed about 1,300 Palestinians. When the death toll was mentioned, one expert on the panel smiled enigmatically and intoned: “It’s unfortunate, but every once in a while you have to mow the lawn.”

The remark, which likened killing hundreds of men, women and children, many of them noncombatants, with trimming the grass, was greeted with a light tittering around the room, filled with some of Washington’s most elite, highly educated and well-paid Middle East experts. Not a single one objected to the panelist’s black humor.

The cavalier language is symptomatic of the policymaking community’s increasingly pervasive tendency to disregard and disparage the humanity of Palestinian victims of Israeli attacks, often waged by Israel’s high-tech drones and U.S.-supplied F-16’s. There is also a tendency to ignore or downplay Israeli war crimes. On the contrary, several analysts and experts were grinning at the reference to Israel’s strategy of mounting periodic attacks on the Palestinians to cull each new generation of militants. Such is the nonchalance of Washington’s policy-advising cognoscenti toward the ongoing and systematic genocide of Gaza’s oppressed population.

This dangerously sociopathic attitude is prevalent whether cloaked in a cheap joke or reflected in the usual failure by the State Department spokesman to condemn or even acknowledge the criminality of Israel’s aerial and sea-based bombardment of Palestinian civilians.

### **Less Than Human**

After the 2012 attacks, the State Department justified Israel’s bombardment of Gaza as Israel’s “right to defend itself” against the launching of relatively primitive rockets, mostly by radical groups, from inside Gaza. Yet, while the State Department urged both sides to avoid civilian casualties, nowhere was there mention of the Palestinians’ right to defend themselves from various attacks by Israel. Apparently only one side is granted that privilege, according to the U.S.

The relegation of Palestinians to a less-than-human status by Israel and the United States, especially the inhabitants of Gaza who are perpetually locked into an open-air prison and subject to an Israeli blockade, was noted by MIT professor Noam Chomsky after a visit to Gaza to attend an academic conference. In comments broadcast by *Democracy Now* on Nov. 14, 2012, Chomsky remarked:

“It’s kind of amazing and inspiring to see people managing somehow to survive as essentially caged animals subject to constant, random, sadistic punishment only to humiliate them no pretext. They [the Palestinians] would like to have dignified lives, but the standard Israeli position is that they shouldn’t raise their heads.”

Instead of a serious effort to reach a peace acceptable to both sides, Israel seems to prefer a state of endless conflict with the Palestinians. After all, the prospect of peace might require the Israeli government to treat their neighbors as equals and withdraw from the West Bank, occupied since 1967, and to lift the Gaza blockade.

Rather than make meaningful concessions, some Israeli hardliners simply promote the idea of periodically “mowing the grass,” i.e. killing the latest generation of Palestinian militants who sprout up from the injustice all around them. Perhaps that is why Israel broke an informal ceasefire (during the 2012 offensive) by assassinating Hamas military commander Ahmed Jabari in an air strike.

Jabari was killed hours after he received the draft of a permanent truce agreement with Israel, which included mechanisms for maintaining the ceasefire, according to Israeli peace activist Gershon Baskin, who helped mediate talks between Israel and Hamas for the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

Jabari was a key Palestinian interlocutor in the release of Shalit, and an important intermediary for truce negotiations with groups such as the PFLP and Islamic Jihad. Such a relatively moderate figure may have been perceived as a threat to Israeli leaders who prefer to portray Hamas as rejectionist toward any peace.

These developments and the U.S. response to them are a chilling omen for those who had hoped for a change in U.S. Middle East policy after the 2012 U.S. presidential election namely, increased pressure on Israel to halt its cruel oppression of Palestinians and obey international law.

There was still a window of opportunity for the U.S. to shift its approach before the violence spiraled out of control. One could have hoped that then President Barack Obama might rein in Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Instead Obama's eerie and reprehensible silence during the Israeli assault on Gaza in December 2008-January 2009 has been repeated by President Donald Trump in the massacres at the Gaza fence last week.

**Elizabeth Murray served as Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East in the National Intelligence Council before retiring after a 27-year career in the U.S. government, where she specialized in Middle Eastern political and media analysis. She is a member of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).**

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## After Gaza Massacre, Israeli Leaders Should Be Prosecuted for War Crimes

After its soldiers conducted a massacre against unarmed protesters in Gaza, Israeli leaders should be prosecuted by the International Criminal Court, argues Marjorie Cohn.

**By Marjorie Cohn**



On March 30, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers shot 773 unarmed Palestinian protesters in Gaza, killing 17 and wounding 1,400. Twenty remain in critical condition. The protesters were marching to demand the internationally mandated right of return of refugees to their cities and villages in what now constitutes Israel.

The Israeli leaders who ordered the massacre were in clear violation of international law. They should be prosecuted for war crimes.

### **Premeditated Force Against Peaceful Protestors**

The use of deadly force against the peaceful protesters was premeditated. The IDF deployed 100 snipers to the border fence between Gaza and Israel, where 30,000 to 40,000 Palestinians had gathered for the Great March of Return. In a damning tweet, later deleted, the IDF wrote, "Nothing was carried out uncontrolled; everything was accurate and measured, and we know where every bullet landed."

Jihad al-Juaidi, director of the ICU at the al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza, told Al Jazeera that all of the injured people who came to the hospital were shot in the



head, pelvic joints or knee joints. "This shows that Israeli forces were shooting-to-kill, or to cause disabilities," al-Juaidi stated.

B'Tselem, a Jerusalem-based human rights organization, characterized the military orders as "shoot-to-kill unarmed Palestinians taking part in these demonstrations."

"Israeli soldiers were not merely using excessive force, but were apparently acting on orders that all but ensured a bloody military response to the Palestinian demonstrations," Eric Goldstein, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's (HRW) Middle East and Africa division, stated.

Senior IDF officers told Haaretz before the protest that a large number of casualties was "a price we would be willing to pay to prevent a breach" of the fence at the border.

Israeli leaders fostered the false narrative that Hamas was sponsoring the protest. Jason Greenblatt, US envoy to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, followed suit, tweeting, "Hamas is encouraging a hostile march on the Israel-Gaza border" and accused Hamas of "inciting violence against Israel."

But the demonstration was actually organized by several Palestinian civil society organizations. "No Palestinian faction, organization or group can claim this march as its own. Hamas was simply riding the wave," Jamil Khader wrote on Mondoweiss. Palestinian flags, not factional ones, were visible.

Conflating civilians with terrorists and framing the planned response as protection against a security risk, Israeli authorities referred to Gaza as a "combat zone."

### **Lethal Force Legal Only in Imminent Threat to Life**

It is illegal to shoot unarmed civilians under international humanitarian law. Some protesters

threw rocks and burned tires near the border fence. But HRW found "no evidence of any protester using firearms or any IDF claim of threatened firearm use at the demonstrations." No Israeli soldiers were killed and "the army did not report any injuries to soldiers."

"Even if a Palestinian was throwing a stone, the chances that under these conditions such an act could cause an imminent threat to life – the only situation that would justify the use of lethal force under international law – are infinitesimal," Yousef Munayyer, executive director of the US Campaign for Palestinian Rights, wrote on HuffPost. "Indeed, even if Palestinians were trying

to climb the fence, that would not give Israel the right to use lethal force.”

Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director of HRW, concurred, stating, “Israeli allegations of violence by some protesters do not change the fact that using lethal force is banned by international law except to meet an imminent threat to life.”

Indeed, the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement specifies, “intentional lethal use of firearms may only be made when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.”

“Senior Israeli leaders who unlawfully called for the use of live ammunition against Palestinian demonstrators who posed no imminent threat to life bear responsibility” for the deaths and injuries, HRW asserted in a statement. That includes Israel’s prime minister, defense minister and chief of staff.

B’Tselem, which has called for Israeli soldiers to disobey patently illegal orders, described the legal duty to disobey unlawful orders: “It is also a criminal offense to obey patently illegal orders. Therefore, as long as soldiers in the field continue to receive orders to use live fire against unarmed civilians, they are duty-bound to refuse to comply.”

### **Israeli Leaders Should be Prosecuted by the ICC**

Israeli leaders responsible for the deaths and injuries on March 30 should be prosecuted in the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Under the Fourth Geneva Convention, an occupying power has a legal duty to protect the occupied. Grave breaches of the convention constitute war crimes. They include willful killing; willfully causing great suffering or serious injury; intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population; and intentionally launching attacks with knowledge they will cause incidental loss of life or injury to civilians. The IDF committed all of these grave breaches on March 30.

Furthermore, under international humanitarian law, the IDF failed to comply with the principles of distinction and proportionality. *Distinction* requires parties to a conflict to direct their attacks only against people taking part in the hostilities. *Proportionality* prohibits an attack if the damage to the civilian population will be greater than the military advantage anticipated from the attack. The IDF violated both of those principles on March 30.



An independent commission of inquiry convened by the UN Human Rights Council to investigate Israel's 2014 massacre in Gaza documented the deaths of 2,251 Palestinians, which included 1,462 civilian deaths and the injuring of 11,231 Palestinians. Six civilians and 67 soldiers were killed and 1,600 injured on the Israeli side. The commission concluded

that Israel, and to a lesser extent, Palestinian armed groups, had likely committed violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, some constituting war crimes.

Currently, ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda is conducting a preliminary examination into the 2014 massacre. She should expand her inquiry to include the events of March 30, 2018.

#### **U.S. Vetoes Call for Investigation**

UN Secretary-General António Guterres and European Union diplomatic chief Federica Mogherini advocated independent investigations into the use of deadly force by the IDF at the border fence on March 30. But the day after the massacre, the United States vetoed a Security Council resolution that called for an "independent and transparent investigation" and affirmed the right of Palestinians to peaceful protest.

Avigdor Lieberman, Israel's defense minister, said the IDF soldiers "deserve a medal" for protecting the border. "As for a commission of inquiry – there won't be one," he declared on Israeli Army Radio.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu praised his troops for "guarding the country's borders" and permitting "Israeli citizens to celebrate the [Passover] holiday peacefully," adding, "Well done to our soldiers."

Rabbi Alissa Wise, deputy director of Jewish Voice for Peace, noted in a statement, "The Israeli military evidently believes that any time Palestinians assert their basic rights in any way, they will be considered violent, and met with deadly violence."

Meanwhile, the Palestinian protests are slated to last until May 15, the day Palestinians commemorate the *Nakba*, or the "great catastrophe" of 1948-9, when

Israel expelled 800,000 Palestinians from their lands to create Israel. Approximately 70 percent of the 1.3 million Gazans are refugees.

"I think the only way truly forward is to recognize that there is a root cause: 70 years of *Nakba*," Wise said.

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Marjorie Cohn is professor emerita at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, former president of the National Lawyers Guild, deputy secretary general of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, an advisory board member of Veterans for Peace and a member of Jewish Voice for Peace. The second, updated edition of her book, [Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral, and Geopolitical Issues](#), was published in November. Visit her website: [MarjorieCohn.com](#). Follow her on Twitter: [@MarjorieCohn](#).

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## On the Gaza Protesters Murdered by Israeli Forces

An attack on protesting Palestinians on March 30 by the Israeli military left 18 dead and thousands injured and constitutes mass murder and a blatant war crime, argues Palestinian human rights attorney Diana Buttu in an interview with Dennis J. Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The latest Israeli slaughter of Gazans falls into the category of shooting fish in a tank. Indeed, as tens of thousands of Gazans protested the longest occupation in modern history and demanded their historical Right to Return, last Friday, March 30, Israeli snipers raised their rifles repeatedly and, from behind a wide-buffer and an electrified fence, opened fire on the Palestinians.

The latest stats of killed and wounded from the so-called confrontation between Israeli sharp-shooters and Palestinians is at least 18 Palestinians killed and over 1,000 wounded. On the Israeli side, zero casualties. Zero!

Diana Buttu is a Palestinian/Canadian lawyer based in the Occupied West Bank of Palestine. She is a former Palestinian negotiator. I spoke with her in Haifa on April 2nd, 2018.

**Dennis Bernstein:** Maybe you could begin with your best information in terms of what happened.

**Diana Buttu:** I can give you the rough numbers. 18 Palestinians are confirmed dead. Others are in very critical condition and unable to get the medical attention they need. Over [1,000] Palestinians were wounded. They are unable to receive treatment both because of the ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip and because of the lack of electricity. Palestinian human rights organizations are calling for the wounded to receive treatment elsewhere, but so far the Israeli government has refused.

**Dennis Bernstein:** What do we know about how this unfolded? I heard in an NPR report that this was not just a protest, that these were militants.

**Diana Buttu:** We know that the Israeli government announced days in advance that they were going to be positioning snipers along the border. Now, there are multiple sets of borders in effect here. There is an electrified fence on the eastern and northern sides of the Gaza Strip. A cement wall is on the southern border with Egypt. The water is blockaded by the Israeli navy on the western side.

In addition to those physical borders, the Israeli army has been enforcing what they call a buffer zone, which is about 1,000 feet away from the electrified fence. We know that when Palestinians approached the buffer zone on the eastern side, the Israelis immediately started shooting Palestinian protesters.

From video footage we can see that people were shot in the back. Others were shot for carrying tires or for simply walking into these areas. These were individuals who posed no threat whatsoever. Even if they were attempting to cross the border, you don't use live fire to kill people who are crossing a border.

And secondly, the point of this was to highlight the fact that Palestinians cannot return. 80% of the Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip does not come from the Gaza Strip. They are actually refugees driven out by the Israelis. While Israel keeps claiming that there were attempts to "infiltrate," in any case this is not a proper response.

The fact that Israel was positioning snipers on the border indicates that they were ready, willing and able to shoot protesters in the back. The head of the Israeli defense establishment has said that every one of these snipers should be commended.

**Dennis Bernstein:** How many Israeli soldiers were wounded and killed?

**Diana Buttu:** Zero. Again, this was not a question of the protesters posing any danger to any individual. It was the mere fact that Palestinians were out in protest.

I want to put this in its proper historical perspective. The reason they were out on March 30 is because this day, in 1976, the Israelis did the exact same thing to Palestinians who were citizens of Israel. At that time, Palestinians were protesting the confiscation of thousands of acres of Palestinian land by the Israeli government in order to make way for Jewish towns.

On that day in 1976 Israel shot and killed six unarmed Palestinian protesters. Here we are forty years later, with people commemorating the killings, Israel does the exact same thing, this time killing three times that number.

**Dennis Bernstein:** The Israelis have declared that there will be no investigation.

**Diana Buttu:** Yes, and this is nothing new. There has never been an investigation into the actions of the army. After the massacre at Jenin in March of 2002, when 52 Palestinians were killed by the Israeli army, the government would not allow an investigation and announced that everything had been justified.

I do not expect any justice coming from the Israeli military establishment.

Trump has made it very clear in the Security Council that there will never be any investigation of these 18 Palestinian deaths.

**Dennis Bernstein:** And this happens at a time when people in the Gaza Strip are suffering on many levels. This protest took a lot of courage, given the fact that everyday life is a struggle. People often refer to the Gaza Strip as one of the largest open-air prisons in the world.

**Diana Buttu:** It has gone beyond that. The analogy was perhaps true in 2005 but now it has gotten worse than that. In prison at least you have electricity, you are still fed three times a day. Israel is making sure that the Palestinians only get electricity two or three hours a day. There is a waiting list of some 30,000 people who want to be able to leave, who have valid visas but are not allowed to leave. Imports are curtailed by the Israelis.

You and I do not measure the quality of our lives by the amount of goods that we have. We assess the quality of our lives by the things we are able to do and the time we are able to spend with friends and loved ones. In the Gaza Strip, people are completely unable to visit one another.

I myself have not been able to enter the Gaza Strip since 2007, which means that

I have left behind all of my friends. And I am one of the lucky ones. My friends have been unable to leave or even think of leaving. Life for people in Gaza is completely miserable, with unfit drinking water, with an electricity infrastructure that is barely functioning, with a healthcare system that is on the verge of collapse, with malnutrition rates soaring, with unemployment rates through the roof. It is little wonder that the UN has said that Gaza will be unlivable by 2020.

**Dennis Bernstein:** How far away are you from these friends who you are not able to visit?

**Diana Buttu:** About fifty miles. The only chance I have of seeing my friends is if they, by some miracle, are able to get a visa and exit and we meet in a third country. The last time this happened was several years ago when we happened to meet in the United States.

**Dennis Bernstein:** So the idea of a two-state solution in this context is really a crazy thought. A paper like *The New York Times* loves maps, but I have never seen a map of independent Palestine. This is the nature of occupation, in the context, wouldn't you say, of ethnic cleansing?

**Diana Buttu:** Absolutely. The ethnic cleansing of Palestine has been the one common thread since 1948. Politicians and diplomats have tried to mask it by calling for things like a two-state solution.

Part of the ethnic cleansing process is to get rid of Palestinians so that they don't have to see them. The tragedy is that no one is labeling it that. Instead they try to hide behind some diplomatic initiative or other.

Once we start looking at it as an ethnic cleansing process, we can move away from all these false attempts to come up with resolutions and put in place mechanisms to stop the process.

**Dennis Bernstein:** Where did the ammunition come from that was used to kill these 18 protesters and wounded some [1,000] more?

**Diana Buttu:** It's a mix. Mostly it is US weaponry. The question is, why is the United States allowing its weaponry to be used on peaceful protesters? Don't we have legislation in place to prevent such human rights abuses from happening? But Israel gets to take a pass when it comes to the use of US weaponry.

My big fear is that these attacks on Gaza are like a live arms show. We saw after the 2014 massacre in Gaza that arms sales actually went up in Israel. This is why it is important to push for a complete arms embargo.

**Dennis Bernstein:** My understanding is that many Palestinians have vowed to continue to protest and resist. Do you think there will be more live fire attacks?

**Diana Buttu:** There will definitely be more protests and Israel will definitely continue to kill Palestinians, because it can. Because so far all we have seen is a green light. We have seen European states express how deeply concerned they are, but this concern doesn't do anything for Palestinians.

There are plans to protest from Land Day, March 30, through May 15, the day that the ethnic cleansing of Palestine is commemorated. It is also the day that the US moves its embassy in violation of international law.

So we will see six weeks of protest taking place. And I certainly expect that the Israeli military machine is going to continue to take Palestinian lives, because no one is stopping them.

**Dennis Bernstein:** Have any reporters been calling you from MSNBC or NPR to get your perspective?

**Diana Buttu:** For the most part, I think that the killing of Palestinians has become so commonplace that it is no longer news. It seems that Trump's tweets are of more importance than 18 lives taken away so quickly, 18 families affected, and their friends and others.

The day before the march, a young artist wrote in the sand on the beaches in Gaza "# I will return" in Arabic. The next day he was one of those who lost their lives. The next day his friend wrote his name in the sand as a means of commemorating him. These are people with real lives, with dreams, with fears, with families. Instead we are reduced to numbers, not nearly as important as the 140 characters that your president tweets out.

**Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net).**

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## From Chaos in Saigon, to Chaos in Washington: 4/4/68

ABC News correspondent Don North left the violence of Vietnam on April 3, 1968 to arrive the next day in Washington, gripped by the violent reaction to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.



**By Don North** *Special to Consortium News*

Since the Tet offensive of January 1968 the mean streets of Saigon reeked of smoke, tear gas and incoming rocket and mortar fire. I had been a correspondent for ABC TV News for the past two years and it was with great relief that I was re-assigned to Washington D.C. in early April.

As I looked back at the skyline of Saigon, a Scotch & Soda in hand as my plane took off, I could see black smoke rising from one part of the city, and white smoke trailing fires set off elsewhere by the Viet Cong. A day later, on Thursday, April 4, as my flight descended into Washington, I could see black smoke rising from one part of the city and white smoke rising from another.

As news of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis spread, despondent crowds gathered in the heart of Washington's business section along 14<sup>th</sup> street. Orderly at first, the crowds became surly and started breaking windows, looting stores and setting fires.

I reported immediately to the ABC News bureau on Connecticut Ave. The news editor said, "Good timing Don, we can use a reporter with combat experience. There's a crew leaving for the riots in a few minutes. There's room in the car for you."

### **The Same Smell of Teargas**

Cruising down 14<sup>th</sup> Street the air was the same as in Saigon: filled with smoke and the smell of tear gas. A light rain was falling. Slick streets were littered with broken glass and bricks. Stretches of 14<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> and H looked like combat zones. Hundreds of blazes set by arsonists would leave wreckage and desolation. We were seeing the beginning of the reaction to the assassination that would beset Washington for the next 72 hours and leave sections of the city in ruins for over 30 years.

Local businesses were being vandalized, windows smashed and merchandise carried off. We pulled up to a liquor store where looters were walking out through smashed windows carrying armloads of booze. We discreetly filmed with an Auricon sound camera through a side window. The looters didn't seem to notice.

Suddenly an angry man rushed at our car with a large brick in his hands and started pounding on a side window. It didn't break as we sped out of his reach.

The riots apparently began nearby with a brick thrown through the window of the Peoples Drug Store at 14<sup>th</sup> Street and U. Dr. King had died at 8 P.M. Though he had ardently preached non-violence, by 10 P.M. large crowds gathered to vent

anger, sadness and frustration that was justified, even if the violence wasn't. Teenagers walked with transistor radios tuned to the news. Many local stations played hymns between newscasts.

Ben's Chili Bowl near the Peoples Drug Store was not targeted by looters and managed to stay open through the night. Stokely Carmichael, a member of the Black Panthers, made the Chili Bowl his headquarters and he led a group of youths into nearby stores demanding they close in respect for Dr. King's death. Carmichael had been a follower of King but had recently become independent. I tried to interview him but he was moving too fast.

But in the weeks following the riots I would often sit down with Carmichael, as he became a nationally known voice against the war I had left behind in Saigon. That night, he urged the crowds to stay calm, but their anger was too great.

The looters soon turned to arson and threw Molotov cocktails into buildings and rocks and bricks at firefighters who tried to put out the blazes. Many African-American store owners sprayed "SOUL" on their windows to be spared.

The D.C. fire department reported 1,180 fires between March 30 and April 14. Property loss caused by the disturbances was extensive. 1,190 buildings, including 283 homes were badly damaged or destroyed an estimated loss at \$25 million. Mostly white residents, fearful of the violence, accelerated their departure for suburban areas.

By Friday, April 5' the unrest spread to other sections of the District, especially 7<sup>th</sup> Street NW, H St and parts of Anacostia. Joining the 3,000 strong D.C. police force, Federal troops and the National Guard were called in and would reach 11,000 in numbers. U.S. Marines mounted machine guns on the steps of the Capitol and Army troops from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry guarded the White

House . Federal troops now occupied



In three days of upheaval, 13 people were killed, two by police officers. Riots that week in Newark caused 27 deaths and 43 were killed in Detroit.

A 5:30 PM curfew was enforced in the District. D.C. Commissioner Walter Washington, later to become Washington's first black Mayor, made nightly appearances during the unrest, and helped to stem the violence. He had rebuffed FBI suggestions that police shoot rioters and looters on the spot.

The military occupation of Washington was the largest of any American city since the Civil War and raised questions about whether it was legal, as the use of federal troops for law enforcement had been banned by the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878.

#### **Killed on the First Anniversary of His Vietnam Speech**

Had the Johnson administration heeded King's words about the state of America and its war in Southeast Asia, perhaps the violence I had left behind in Saigon

and arrived to in downtown Washington may never have happened.

In his Riverside Church speech given on April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his assassination, King said:

Surely this is the first time in our nation's history that a significant number of its religious leaders have chosen to move beyond the prophesying of smooth patriotism to the high grounds of a firm dissent based upon the mandates of conscience and the reading of history.

As I have called for radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam, many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. At the heart of their concerns, this query has often loomed large and loud: "Why are you speaking about the war, Dr. King? Why are you joining the voices of dissent?" "Peace and civil rights don't mix," they say. "Aren't you hurting the cause of your people?" they ask.

There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I and others have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor, both black and white, through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched this program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything on a society gone mad on war. And I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube.

So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such. Perhaps a more tragic recognition of reality took place when it became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem. So we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools. So we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would hardly live on the same block in Chicago. I could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor.

Don North, a veteran war correspondent who covered the Vietnam War and many other conflicts around the world, is the author of *Inappropriate Conduct*, the story of a WW II correspondent whose career was crushed by the intrigue he



uncovered.

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## King's Legacy Betrayed

The legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., who was assassinated 50 years ago today, has been cynically exploited by corporate and political leaders who care more for the needs of their rich donors than black constituents, comments Margaret Kimberley.

By Margaret Kimberley *Special to Consortium News*



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the preeminent leader of the black liberation movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Millions of people engaged in the struggle against America's shameful apartheid system but King was the most influential. His actions are remembered, his words are quoted by activists, politicians, and pundits. His birthday is a national holiday. Only the worst and most retrograde racists dare to speak ill of King.

But the lionizing is mostly a sham. In fact there are very few people who remember the importance of what King said, what he did or why and how they should replicate his work. His legacy has been subverted and is now understood only by the most conscious students of history.

Nothing illustrated this state of affairs more clearly than the use of King's words in a Ram truck commercial broadcast during the 2018 Super Bowl football championship. Viewers were told that Ram trucks are "built to serve."

The voice over is provided by King himself speaking exactly 50 years earlier, on February 4, 1968. The Drum Major Instinct sermon was a call to reject the ego driven desire for attention in favor of working for more altruistic pursuits. "If you want to say that I was a drum major say that I was a drum major for justice."

The commercial's creators deliberately ignored the portion of the sermon in which King derided the influence of advertising. He even mentioned vehicle advertising specifically. He warned that "gentleman of massive verbal persuasion" can influence people to act against their own interests. "In order to make your neighbors envious you must drive this type of car."

### **A Nation Going Backwards**

Corporate interests are not alone in pretending to honor King while actually attacking him. King's legacy is severely diminished because it has been used by cynical individuals for corrupt purposes. As we commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his assassination we see a nation that has moved backwards on nearly every front. Legalized discrimination was eliminated but powerful forces undermined progress and America in 2018 is devoid of the change that King fought to make real.

Much of the blame lies at the feet of the Democratic Party, who have an undeserved reputation for enacting progressive policies. In reality, Democrats actively targeted black people for joblessness, poverty, imprisonment and disenfranchisement. Democrats became the party of corporate interests and aligned themselves with every neoliberal initiative. They forsook the union movement, working hand in hand with finance capitalists to take living wage jobs out of the country. Bill Clinton oversaw the end of public assistance as a right, destroying what Franklin Roosevelt enacted 60 years earlier. He built on the work of Ronald Reagan and massively increased the prison population.

Barack Obama offered a "grand bargain" of austerity to Republicans and continued the George W. Bush policy of tax cuts for the wealthiest. The banks which created the 2008 financial collapse were rewarded with huge bailouts of public funds. Black people ended up losing the small bit of wealth they held before the crash and now lead only in the negative measurements of quality of life.

Democrats destroy public education through charter schools and refuse to raise the minimum wage even when they control Congress and have the power to act. They were never the party of peace and they are now most outspoken in encouraging an anti-Russian resumption of the Cold War and supporting imperialist interventions.

After the legislative victories of the 1960s black Americans were ignored, subjugated or co-opted. It is true that there are thousands of black elected officials, when in King's day there were hardly any. But this political class is a traitorous one and works for its own benefit, its patrons in corporate America and the civil rights organizations that are subsidiaries of the Democratic Party. The black political class went along with every sordid deal that Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama pursued. Their positions are secure but the rest of black America is anything but.

### **Prison Population Explodes**

A glaring example is the enormous increase in incarceration rates. When Martin Luther King was alive there were only 300,000 incarcerated Americans. There are now more than 2 million. The exponential increase is not coincidental. Mass incarceration was a direct reaction to the freedom movement. Segregation put black people under physical control and the system devised new ways to secure the same result when it ended.

Black men became the face of drug dealing, or deadbeat fatherhood or anything else that the press and politicians told white Americans to fear and hate. The ripple effect is terrible and damages family life, the ability to earn a living and even to vote. In 48 states felons either lose the franchise permanently or are prevented from voting until all supervision is lifted. In Florida alone 1.5 million people cannot vote because of past convictions. A recent court case declared this rule unconstitutional and if a November 2018 ballot measure passes they may have their voting rights restored. That will be a happy result but there are 5 million more Americans, disproportionately black, who elsewhere lose the ability to vote due to criminal convictions.

Until incarceration becomes a mass movement, political issue, the Voting Rights Act amounts to very little. Actually the act already amounts to little because the Supreme Court nullified its most important provisions requiring southern states to seek permission before changing voting rules. The Democrats are less concerned with getting out the vote than in making their wealthy patrons happy and protecting the Senate majority and federal judiciary they claim is so important.

Of course the Democrats are in a bind. They don't want to get out the vote because that would mean fighting for the issues that the masses need addressed. The wishes of wealthy, corporate America don't dovetail with those of working people. Fat cat funders don't want an increased minimum wage. Getting out the vote would mean biting the hand that feeds. So the people be damned.

### **King's Challenge to Militarism Defied**

King began his fight for the particular needs of black people in a uniquely oppressive system. As years went by he also opposed the economic system itself and the war in Vietnam. In 2017 the Democrats, including most Congressional Black Caucus members, went along with Donald Trump's request for a 10% increase of an already huge military budget. They will go through the pretense of complaining when that increase inevitably restricts federal spending for social needs, but they are connivers who hope we miss their charade.

The liberation movement succeeded against great odds. Most black people then as now lived in the southern states and could not vote. Yet their coordinated mass action won them the franchise anyway. That lesson must not be forgotten as the juggernaut of neoliberal plots threatens everyone.

Every major American city is undergoing an onslaught of gentrification which displaces millions of black people at the whim of finance capital. The politicians who will speak in praise of King today do nothing to stop them. In fact they depend upon their largesse to stay in office.

They do nothing to stop the continued terror of billionaire rule. Instead they assist the richest in grabbing more and more. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos this year became the richest person on the planet. His plans for a new Amazon HQ could be funded entirely by his corporation. Instead cities across the country scramble to give away property and tax dollars to help fund the race to the bottom for workers.

### **Hollow Admiration**

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. should be remembered for his tremendous courage in speaking out against the power of money and the military industrial complex. The poseurs who go along to get along should be silent today. The past 50 years have been so tragic because the hard won victories were deliberately destroyed.

King inspired the people to fight for their needs. He did so when the New York Times and Washington Post vilified him. He spoke against the Vietnam war when his compatriots feared angering Lyndon Johnson. The mass action movement that he led forced LBJ to act when he didn't want to. If politicians act on behalf of the people it is never because they have the right motives.

That is what we must remember about King. The admiration is hollow unless we do as he and millions of others did and commit ourselves to challenging the system. That will mean openly and loudly denouncing the people committed to destroying what they worked and died to achieve. The worst traitors are the most prominent and well respected. But the respect is undeserved and quite dangerous. The night before he was killed King spoke of getting to the promised land. That won't



happen until the scoundrels are named and opposed. Honoring King's legacy demands that we do just that.

**Margaret Kimberley** is Editor and Senior Columnist at Black Agenda Report. Ms. Kimberley serves on the Administrative Committee of the United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC), the Coordinating Committee of Black Alliance for Peace (BAP) and the Advisory Board of [ExposeFacts.org](http://ExposeFacts.org). She is writing a book about racism and the American presidency. She is a graduate of Williams College and lives in New York City.

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## The Role of Youth in a Hoped-for Transformation

The massive turnout for the March for Our Lives demonstration in Washington on March 24 has given rise to hope that a new youth movement can spur a social transformation in the United States, write Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers.

**By Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers**

The eruption of youth protests over gun violence in schools and other issues is another indicator that the [2020s could be a decade of transformation](#) where people [demand economic, racial and environmental justice](#) as well as peace. Students who are in their teens now will be in their twenties then. They will have experience in how protests can change political culture.

Some view the youth awakening in these protests as [reminiscent of youth movements](#) in previous generations, others are less optimistic. We cannot predict the role this generation will play, but throughout the history of mass movements, youth have been a key factor by pushing boundaries and demanding change.

One of the slogans in the actions against gun violence is "adults failed to solve the problem." The truth is, as many youth are aware, those currently in power have failed on many fronts, e.g. climate change, wealth disparity, racial injustice, never-ending wars and militarism, lack of health care and more. These crises are coming to a head and provide the environment for transformational changes, if we act.

## **Beware of Democratic Party Co-option**

One of the challenges youth, and older, activists face is the Democratic Party. Democrats have a long history of co-opting political movements. They are present in recent mobilizations, such as the Women's March and March for our Lives, which both centered on voting as the most important action to take.

Big Democratic Party donors, like George and Amal Clooney, provided massive resources to the March for Our Lives. The corporate media covered the students extensively, encouraged attendance at the marches and reported widely on them.

As Bruce Dixon writes, "It's not hard to see the hand of the Democratic party behind the tens of millions in corporate contributions and free media accorded the March For Our Lives mobilization. 2018 is a midterm election year, and November is only seven months away. The Democrats urgently need some big sticks with which to beat out the vote this fall..."

Democratic politicians see the gun issue as an opportunity for the 'Blue Wave' they envision for 2018, even though the Democrat's history of confronting gun violence has been dismal. When Democrats controlled Congress and the presidency, they did not challenge the culture of violence, confront the NRA or stop militarized policing that is resulting in hundreds of killings by police.

Ajamu Baraka writes, "Liberals and Democrat party connected organizations and networks have been quite adept at getting out in front of movements to pre-empt their radical potential and steer them back into the safe arms of liberal conformism." Indeed the history of the Democratic Party since its founding as a slave-owners party has been one of absorbing political movements and weakening them.

For this new generation of activists to reach their potential, they must understand we live in a mirage democracy and cannot elect our way out of these crises. Our tasks are much larger. Violence is deeply embedded in US culture, dating to the founding of the nation when gun laws were designed for white colonizers to take land from Indigenous peoples and control black slaves.

When it comes to using the gun issue for elections, the challenge for the Democrats is "to keep the public anger high, but the discussion shallow, limited, and ahistorical," as Bruce Dixon writes. Our task is to understand the roots of the crises we face.

Historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz describes this in her new book, Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment. The culture of violence in the US goes beyond the horrific shooting in schools to the militarization of our communities and military aggression abroad. The US military has killed more than

20 million people in 37 nations since World War II.

One step you can take in your community is to find out if there is a Junior ROTC program in your local school and shut it down.

### **Potential for Youth to Lead in Era of Transformation**

One of the reasons we predict the 2020s may be an era of transformation is because issues that have been ignored or mishandled by powerholders are becoming so extreme they can no longer be ignored. Bruce Dixon of Black Agenda Report writes the gun protests present an opportunity to highlight all the issues where Democrats (and Republicans) have failed us.

Youth are already involved, often playing leadership roles, in many fronts of struggle. Rev. Jared Sawyer, Jr. writes that when racial violence arose at the "University of Missouri in recent years, student athletes and scholars united in protest, prompting the administration to take action. Organizations like Black Youth Power 100 have arisen in the wake of police" violence against black people. Youth are on the front lines of the environmental movement, blocking pipelines and carbon infrastructure to prevent climate change. Youth are leading the movement to protect immigrants from mass deportation.

This week, Hampton students took to the streets over sexual violence, housing, food and other problems on campus. Students at Howard University started HU Resist, to "make sure that Howard University fulfills its mission." They are in their third day of occupying the administration building.

At March for Our Lives protests, some participants saw the connections between gun violence and other issues. Tom Hall reported that those who "attended the rally had far more on their minds than gun control and the midterm elections—the issues promoted by the media and the Democratic Party. Many sought to connect the epidemic of mass shootings in American schools to broader issues, from the promotion of militarism and war, to poverty and social inequality." Youth also talked about tax cuts for the rich, inadequate healthcare, teacher strikes, the need for jobs and a better quality of life. He noted those who attended were "searching for a political perspective," and that, while it was not seen from the stage, opposition to war was a common concern.

Robert Koehler writes, "This emerging movement must address the whole spectrum of violence." He includes racist violence, military violence, mass incarceration and the "mortally sinful corporate greed and of course, the destruction of the environment and all the creatures." What unites all of these issues, Koehler writes, is the "ability to dehumanize certain people." Dehumanization is required to allow mass murder, whether by a single gunman or

in war, as well as the economic violence that leaves people homeless and hungry, or for the violence of denying people necessary healthcare and to pay people so little they need multiple jobs to survive.

### **Movements are Growing, Now How Do We Win?**

We have written about the stages of successful social movements and that overall the United States is in the final stage before victory. This is the era of building national consensus on solutions to the crises we face and mobilizing millions to take action in support of these solutions.

Protests have been growing in the US over the past few decades. Strong anti-globalization protests were organized under Clinton to oppose the World Trade Organization. Under the Bush administration, hundreds of thousands of people took the streets against the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq. The anti-war movement faded under the Obama administration, even though he escalated US militarism, but other movements arose such as Occupy, immigrant's rights, the fight for 15, Idle No More and black lives matter. Erica Chenoweth posits that current youth activists "did their first activism with their moms. It's a quicker learning curve for kids."

At present, large drivers of mass protests are reaction to the actions of the Trump administration and the Democrats using their resources to augment and steer anti-Trump anger into elections. To prevent what happened to the anti-war movement under President Obama, people will need a broader understanding of the root causes of the crises we face, not the shallow analysis provided by the corporate media, and will need to understand how social movements can be effective.

To assist in this education, **Popular Resistance is launching the Popular Resistance School**. The first eight week course will begin on May 1 and will cover social movement theory – how social movements develop, how they win and roles people and organizations play in movements. All are welcome to participate in the school. There is no cost to join, but we do ask those who are able to donate to help cover the costs.

**For more information on the school and to sign up, click here.** Those who sign up will receive a weekly video lecture, a curriculum and an invitation to join a discussion group (each one will be limited to 30 participants). People who complete the course can then host the course locally with virtual support from Popular Resistance.

The next decade has the potential to be transformative. To make it so, we must not only develop national consensus that issues are being mishandled, that

policies need to change and that we can change them, but we must also educate ourselves on issues and how to be effective. We have the power to create the change we want to see.

*This piece was first published on [PopularResistance.org](http://PopularResistance.org)*

**Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers are co-directors of Popular Resistance.**

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## Breaking the Silence

Twenty-seven writers, journalists, film-makers, artists, academics, former intelligence officers and democrats call on the government of Ecuador in this letter to allow Julian Assange his right of freedom of speech.

### **THE ISOLATION OF JULIAN ASSANGE IS THE SILENCING OF US ALL**

If it was ever clear that the case of Julian Assange was never just a legal case, but a struggle for the protection of basic human rights, it is now.

Citing his critical tweets about the recent detention of Catalan president Carles Puigdemont in Germany, and following pressure from the US, Spanish and UK governments, the Ecuadorian government has installed an electronic jammer to stop Assange communicating with the outside world via the internet and phone.

As if ensuring his total isolation, the Ecuadorian government is also refusing to allow him to receive visitors. Despite two UN rulings describing his detention as unlawful and mandating his immediate release, Assange has been effectively imprisoned since he was first placed in isolation in Wandsworth prison in London in December 2010. He has never been charged with a crime. The Swedish case against him collapsed and was withdrawn, while the United States has stepped up efforts to prosecute him. His only “crime” is that of a true journalist – telling the world the truths that people have a right to know.

Under its previous president, the Ecuadorian government bravely stood against the bullying might of the United States and granted Assange political asylum as a political refugee. International law and the morality of human rights was on its side.

Today, under extreme pressure from Washington and its collaborators, another government in Ecuador justifies its gagging of Assange by stating that “Assange’s behavior, through his messages on social media, put at risk good relations which this country has with the UK, the rest of the EU and other nations.”

This censorious attack on free speech is not happening in Turkey, Saudi Arabia or China; it is right in the heart of London. If the Ecuadorian government does not cease its unworthy action, it, too, will become an agent of persecution rather than the valiant nation that stood up for freedom and for free speech. If the EU and the UK continue to participate in the scandalous silencing of a true dissident in their midst, it will mean that free speech is indeed dying in Europe.

This is not just a matter of showing support and solidarity. We are appealing to all who care about basic human rights to call on the government of Ecuador to continue defending the rights of a courageous free speech activist, journalist and whistleblower.

We ask that his basic human rights be respected as an Ecuadorian citizen and internationally protected person and that he not be silenced or expelled.

If there is no freedom of speech for Julian Assange, there is no freedom of speech for any of us – regardless of the disparate opinions we hold.

We call on President Moreno to end the isolation of Julian Assange now.

List of signatories (in alphabetic order):

**Pamela Anderson**, actress and activist

**Jacob Appelbaum**, freelance journalist

**Renata Avila**, International Human Rights Lawyer

**Sally Burch**, British/Ecuadorian journalist

**Alicia Castro**, Argentina's ambassador to the United Kingdom 2012-16

**Naomi Colvin**, Courage Foundation

**Noam Chomsky**, linguist and political theorist

**Brian Eno**, musician

**Joseph Farrell**, WikiLeaks Ambassador and board member of The Centre for Investigative Journalism

**Teresa Forcades**, Benedictine nun, Montserrat Monastery

**Charles Glass**, American-British author, journalist, broadcaster

**Chris Hedges**, journalist

**Srečko Horvat**, philosopher, Democracy in Europe Movement (DiEM25)

**Jean Michel Jarre**, musician

**John Kiriakou**, former CIA counterterrorism officer and former senior investigator, U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

**Lauri Love**, computer scientist and activist

**Ray McGovern**, former CIA analyst, Presidential advisor

**John Pilger**, journalist and film-maker

**Angela Richter**, theater director, Germany

**Saskia Sassen**, sociologist, Columbia University

**Oliver Stone**, film-maker

**Vaughan Smith**, English journalist

**Yanis Varoufakis**, economist, former Greek finance minister

**Natalia Viana**, investigative journalist and co-director of Agência Pública, Brazil

**Ai Weiwei**, artist

**Vivienne Westwood**, fashion designer and activist

**Slavoj Žižek**, philosopher, Birkbeck Institute for Humanities

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