

Genocide in Gaza*

Prabhat Patnaik

In response to the attack by Hamas on October 7, Israeli forces have not only pounded the Gaza strip with massive bombing, killing nearly 2000 Palestinians and wounding at least 7000 (till Friday night), but have cut off all supplies of food, electricity, gas and water to Gaza. In addition, on Friday they gave a warning to 1.1 million residents of northern Gaza, that is, to half of the population of the whole of Gaza (which numbers 2.2 million crowded into an area measuring merely 365 square kilometres) to leave their homes and evacuate the region within 24 hours in preparation for an Israeli ground offensive. Since all entry points from Gaza to Israel are closed, and since the single entry point from Gaza to Egypt has been bombed, so that people cannot use it (quite apart from the fact that Egypt has made it clear that it would not welcome Palestinian refugees), the Israeli evacuation order is patently incapable of being implemented.

In addition, even if exits from Gaza were available and open, the sheer scale of the exodus of a million persons, including the elderly, the sick, and women and children, in the space of just twenty-four hours, which means about 42,000 persons per hour or 12 persons per second, is a physical impossibility. The order is at best a fig-leaf to cover up the carnage that awaits the residents of Gaza when the ground offensive by Israeli troops begins: it can then be claimed that the population had been forewarned and if it still stayed on and got slaughtered then the fault is not of the assaulting troops. Quite apart from the carnage by the invading troops, the sheer desperation and panic caused by the evacuation order, not to mention the helpless wanderings by numerous people fleeing their homes and the continuous bombings that are being carried out on the roads that the refugees would take, will claim thousands of lives. What we are witnessing in short is the perpetration of a genocide.

According to the 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention, a genocide is defined as a set of “acts committed to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”. What is happening in Gaza exactly fits this definition of genocide. The western imperialist powers are defending this genocide on the grounds that Israel has a right to defend itself against terrorist attacks, and that Hamas, a terrorist organisation, has carried out such a brutal attack and will do so in future; since Hamas is hiding behind the population of Gaza it becomes necessary to adopt these measures to subdue Hamas.

Let us for a moment accept western imperialists’ description of Hamas as a terrorist organisation, which Narendra Modi too has faithfully echoed. But no international law permits Israel or any other country to carry out genocide against a whole people because there are terrorists located among them. In fact collective punishment inflicted against an entire people for offenses they did not personally commit constitutes a war crime under the Fourth Geneva Convention; and what Israel is doing is not just “collective punishment” but a genocidal attack. If denying water, electricity and gas, which is a form of “collective punishment”, is itself a war crime, if the bombing of civilian areas is itself a war crime (and non-civilians being located in such areas does not change their classification as civilian areas, and hence does not negate the fact of such bombing being a war crime), then the preemptory and impossible

order to vacate north Gaza, is a war crime on an unimaginable scale; and so is the denial of food to the population of the Gaza strip. The United Nations has called the Israeli actions that have followed the attack by Hamas, a violation of international law; this violation has become nothing short of a genocide.

The fact that the western imperialist countries that are so worked up about Israeli civilian casualties caused by the Hamas attack, do not utter a single word against the massive Israeli war crimes, including the genocide being unleashed on the Palestinian people, betrays a mindset where Palestinian lives matter less than Israeli lives; it is a racial mindset which the imperialist powers share with the apartheid regime that is currently ruling Israel with their support. This mindset, sought to be justified by invoking fake stories, spread by fanatical Israeli settlers, of Hamas beheading Jewish babies, was evident in the words used in defence of the “complete siege” of Gaza by the Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant: “we are fighting animals and are acting accordingly” (quoted in Marjorie Cohn, Truthout, October 12).

But calling Hamas a “terrorist organisation” is closing one’s eyes to three quarters of a century of occupation by Israel of Palestinian territories, during which its population has been ruthlessly oppressed, brutalised, dispossessed and humiliated. I was a juror on an International Tribunal on US Imperialism recently and we heard testimonies from witnesses from 15 countries that have been subjected to economic sanctions by the US and other imperialist powers. When the witness from Gaza was deposing before the tribunal some months ago, there were bombs actually exploding in the background. It was clearly a case of civilian bombing and hence constituted a war crime. It is this chain of war crimes, this subjugation of a whole people in a manner reminiscent of settler colonialism, climaxed by the desecration of the Al-Aqsa mosque, that has generated the kind of action that Hamas has been engaged in.

Under international law, the Palestinians have a right to resist, including through armed struggle, the forcible takeover of their lands by the Israeli occupiers; this position was reiterated by a UN General Assembly resolution in 1983 which asserted “the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples for their independence, territorial integrity, national unity and liberation from colonial domination, apartheid and foreign occupation by all available means, including armed struggle” (quoted in Cohn op.cit.). Dismissing Hamas as a mere terrorist organisation as opposed to a group engaged in an anti-colonial struggle, amounts therefore to ignoring the entire context of the blatant subjugation of the Palestinian people. This context gives rise to such organisations whose recourse to armed struggle per se, whether wise or not, cannot be dismissed as either illegal or immoral.

To say all this is not to endorse all that Hamas is doing, but to underscore the fact that the fundamental assumption of the Israeli regime and its western imperialist backers, that one can use sheer force to “normalise” the subjugation of a people and the occupation of their land, is utterly invalid, a view shared by a large and growing number of persons in Israel. The Israeli regime’s response to the Hamas attack is based precisely on this assumption, namely that removing some “trouble-making” “terrorist” organisations will “resolve” the problem and bring peace to Israel. The fact that it has not done so for the last 75 years is lost on the Israeli regime. Its current genocidal attempt will only bring even greater retaliation from Palestinian organisations in future, if not from Hamas then from some other organisation; it will cause even greater loss of lives in a spiral of ascending violence.

People of democratic opinion all over the world deeply empathise with the suffering that the Jewish people have endured throughout history and especially under Nazism in Europe; the Israeli regime and its metropolitan backers however are making cynical use of this suffering to promote the imperialist project, thereby trivialising it. What they are inflicting on the Palestinian people is reminiscent in many ways of what the Jewish people had themselves suffered under the Nazis: indeed some have drawn a parallel between the uprising in Gaza and the Jewish uprising against the Nazi occupiers in the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. But Netanyahu, backed to the hilt by western imperialism, is relentless, as much in his fascist viciousness as in his short-sightedness. In the name of countering ‘anti-semitism’, the French government has banned demonstrations against the genocide of the Palestinian people, a ban replicated in many other places within the metropolitan world.

The latest flare-up in the war between Israel and Hamas brings to fore the absolute necessity of reaching a negotiated, lasting settlement of the Palestine conflict. The immediate task however is to stop the genocide of the Palestinian people by lifting the blockade that Israel has imposed on them, and preventing an Israeli ground invasion of the Gaza strip. The UN has become a helpless spectator because imperialism has paralysed the Security Council. Arousing world public opinion remains the only hope.

* This article was originally published in the [Peoples Democracy](#) on October 22, 2023.