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Worse Than a Crime

By Uri Avnery

26/01/08 "**ICH**" -- - IT LOOKED like the fall of the Berlin wall. And not only did it look like it. For a moment, the Rafah crossing *was* the Brandenburg Gate.

It is impossible not to feel exhilaration when masses of oppressed and hungry people break down the wall that is shutting them in, their eyes radiant, embracing everybody they meet - to feel so even when it is your own government that erected the wall in the first place.

The Gaza Strip is the largest prison on earth. The breaking of the Rafah wall was an act of liberation. It proves that an inhuman policy is always a stupid policy: no power can stand up against a mass of people that has crossed the border of despair.

That is the lesson of Gaza, January, 2008.

ONE MIGHT repeat the famous saying of the French statesman Boulay de la Meurthe, slightly amended: It is worse than a war crime, it is a blunder!

Months ago, the two Ehuds - Barak and Olmert - imposed a blockade on the Gaza Strip, and boasted about it. Lately they have tightened the deadly noose even more, so that hardly anything at all could be brought into the Strip. Last week they made the blockade absolute - no food, no medicines. Things reached a climax when they stopped the fuel, too. Large areas of Gaza remained without electricity - incubators for premature babies, dialysis machines, pumps for water and sewage. Hundreds of thousands remained without heating in the severe cold, unable to cook, running out of food.

Again and again, Aljazeera broadcast the pictures into millions of homes in the Arab world. TV stations all over the world showed them, too. From Casablanca to Amman angry mass protest broke out and frightened the authoritarian Arab regimes. Hosni Mubarak called Ehud Barak in panic. That evening Barak was

compelled to cancel, at least temporarily, the fuel-blockade he had imposed in the morning. Apart from that, the blockade remained total.

It is hard to imagine a more stupid act.

THE REASON given for the starving and freezing of one and a half million human beings, crowded into a territory of 365 square kilometers, is the continued shooting at the town of Sderot and the adjoining villages.

That is a well-chosen reason. It unites the primitive and poor parts of the Israeli public. It blunts the criticism of the UN and the governments throughout the world, who might otherwise have spoken out against a collective punishment that is, undoubtedly, a war crime under international law.

A clear picture is presented to the world: the Hamas terror regime in Gaza launches missiles at innocent Israeli civilians. No government in the world can tolerate the bombardment of its citizens from across the border. The Israeli military has not found a military answer to the Qassam missiles. Therefore there is no other way than to exert such strong pressure on the Gaza population as to make them rise up against Hamas and compel them to stop the missiles.

The day the Gaza electricity works stopped operating, our military correspondents were overjoyed: only two Qassams were launched from the Strip. So it works! Ehud Barak is a genius!

But the day after, 17 Qassams landed, and the joy evaporated. Politicians and generals were (literally) out of their minds: one politician proposed to "act crazier than them", another proposed to "shell Gaza's urban area indiscriminately for every Qassam launched", a famous professor (who is a little bit deranged) proposed the exercise of "ultimate evil".

The government scenario was a repeat of Lebanon War II (the report about which is due to be published in a few days). Then: Hizbullah captured two soldiers on the Israeli side of the border, now: Hamas fired on towns and villages on the Israeli side of the border. Then: the government decide in haste to start a war, now: the government decided in haste to impose a total blockade. Then: the government ordered the massive bombing of the civilian population in order to get them to pressure Hizbullah, now: the government decided to cause massive suffering of the civilian population in order to get them to pressure Hamas.

The results were the same in both cases: the Lebanese population did not rise up against Hizbullah, but on the contrary, people of all religious communities united behind the Shiite organization. Hassan Nasrallah became the hero of the entire Arab world. And now: the population unites behind Hamas and accuses Mahmoud

Abbas of cooperation with the enemy. A mother who has no food for her children does not curse Ismail Haniyeh, she curses Olmert, Abbas and Mubarak.

SO WHAT to do? After all, it is impossible to tolerate the suffering of the inhabitants of Sderot, who are under constant fire.

What is being hidden from the embittered public is that the launching of the Qassams could be stopped tomorrow morning.

Several months ago Hamas proposed a cease-fire. It repeated the offer this week.

A cease-fire means, in the view of Hamas: the Palestinians will stop shooting Qassams and mortar shells, the Israelis will stop the incursions into Gaza, the "targeted" assassinations and the blockade.

Why doesn't our government jump at this proposal?

Simple: in order to make such a deal, we must speak with Hamas, directly or indirectly. And this is precisely what the government refuses to do.

Why? Simple again: Sderot is only a pretext - much like the two captured soldiers were a pretext for something else altogether. The real purpose of the whole exercise is to overthrow the Hamas regime in Gaza and to prevent a Hamas takeover in the West Bank.

In simple and blunt words: the government sacrifices the fate of the Sderot population on the altar of a hopeless principle. It is more important for the government to boycott Hamas - because it is now the spearhead of Palestinian resistance - than to put an end to the suffering of Sderot. All the media cooperate with this pretence.

IT HAS been said before that it is dangerous to write satire in our country - too often the satire becomes reality. Some readers may recall a satirical article I wrote months ago. In it I described the situation in Gaza as a scientific experiment designed to find out how far one can go, in starving a civilian population and turning their lives into hell, before they raise their hands in surrender.

This week, the satire has become official policy. Respected commentators declared explicitly that Ehud Barak and the army chiefs are working on the principle of "trial and error" and change their methods daily according to results. They stop the fuel to Gaza, observe how this works and backtrack when the international reaction is too negative. They stop the delivery of medicines, see how it works, etc. The scientific aim justifies the means.

The man in charge of the experiment is Defense Minister Ehud Barak, a man of many ideas and few scruples, a man whose whole turn of mind is basically

inhuman. He is now, perhaps, the most dangerous person in Israel, more dangerous than Ehud Olmert and Binyamin Netanyahu, dangerous to the very existence of Israel in the long run.

The man in charge of execution is the Chief of Staff. This week we had the chance of hearing speeches by two of his predecessors, generals Moshe Ya'alon and Shaul Mofaz, in a forum with inflated intellectual pretensions. Both were discovered to have views that place them somewhere between the extreme Right and the ultra-Right. Both have a frighteningly primitive mind. There is no need to waste a word about the moral and intellectual qualities of their immediate successor, Dan Halutz. If these are the voices of the three last Chiefs of Staff, what about the incumbent, who cannot speak out as openly as they? Has this apple fallen further from the tree?

Until three days ago, the generals could entertain the opinion that the experiment was succeeding. The misery in the Gaza Strip had reached its climax. Hundreds of thousands were threatened by actual hunger. The chief of UNRWA warned of an impending human catastrophe. Only the rich could still drive a car, heat their homes and eat their fill. The world stood by and wagged its collective tongue. The leaders of the Arab states voiced empty phrases of sympathy without raising a finger.

Barak, who has mathematical abilities, could calculate when the population would finally collapse.

AND THEN something happened that none of them foresaw, in spite of the fact that it was the most foreseeable event on earth.

When one puts a million and a half people in a pressure cooker and keeps turning up the heat, it will explode. That is what happened at the Gaza-Egypt border.

At first there was a small explosion. A crowd stormed the gate, Egyptian policemen opened live fire, dozens were wounded. That was a warning.

The next day came the big attack. Palestinian fighters blew up the wall in many places. Hundreds of thousands broke out into Egyptian territory and took a deep breath. The blockade was broken.

Even before that, Mubarak was in an impossible situation. Hundreds of millions of Arabs, a billion Muslims, saw how the Israeli army had closed the Gaza strip off on three sides: the North, the East and the sea. The fourth side of the blockade was provided by the Egyptian army.

The Egyptian president, who claims the leadership of the entire Arab world, was seen as a collaborator with an inhuman operation conducted by a cruel enemy in

order to gain the favor (and the money) of the Americans. His internal enemies, the Muslim Brothers, exploited the situation to debase him in the eyes of his own people.

It is doubtful if Mubarak could have persisted in this position. But the Palestinian masses relieved him of the need to make a decision. They decided for him. They broke out like a tsunami wave. Now he has to decide whether to succumb to the Israeli demand to re-impose the blockade on his Arab brothers.

And what about Barak's experiment? What's the next step? The options are few:

(a) To re-occupy Gaza. The army does not like the idea. It understands that this would expose thousands of soldiers to a cruel guerilla war, which would be unlike any intifada before.

(b) To tighten the blockade again and exert extreme pressure on Mubarak, including the use of Israeli influence on the US Congress to deprive him of the billions he gets every year for his services.

(c) To turn the curse into a blessing, by handing the Strip over to Mubarak, pretending that this was Barak's hidden aim all along. Egypt would have to safeguard Israel's security, prevent the launching of Qassams and expose its own soldiers to a Palestinian guerilla war - when it thought it was rid of the burden of this poor and barren area, and after the infrastructure there has been destroyed by the Israeli occupation. Probably Mubarak will say: Very kind of you, but no thanks.

The brutal blockade was a war crime. And worse: it was a stupid blunder.