

Questioning Israeli tactics

This week, a deranged Israeli stopped a group of Palestinian laborers, checked their ID cards to make sure they were all Arabs, and then killed eight of them. Palestinians rioted across the occupied West Bank and Gaza, as well as in Israel proper. Israeli security forces opened fire, killing at least 15 Palestinians and wounding more than 800.

At almost the same time, the spiritual leader of the Indian state of Kashmir's rebellious Moslems was murdered by unknown assailants. Indian paramilitary police opened fire on furious Moslem demonstrators and on the slain leader's funeral cortege, killing 60 and injuring 300.

There was a certain sense of irony in both of these brutal responses. India has long denounced Israel for its harsh repression of Palestinian nationalism. Yet Indian police reacted just like the Israelis by trying to use lethal force to cow demonstrators into submission.

When criticized by the outside world for using too much force against Palestinians, angry Israelis retort that people should look at callous regimes, such as Syria or Iraq, and see how often they gun down their own people. "Why pick on us?" ask Israelis, who can now add holier-than-thou India to their list.

But there is an important difference. Israel, as often noted, is a democracy that owes its very existence to western, and particularly American, financial, military and political support. Western democracies do have a right to demand that Israel adhere to their values of decency and rule of law.

This is especially true in the case of the Palestinians, who are being evicted from their ancestral homes by Israeli settlers and military occupation in clear violation of international law.

Equally important, there is absolutely no reason for Israel to inflict so many casualties on the

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unarmed Palestinian population. This point was underlined last week by reports from international human rights groups alleging that Israel had wounded some 50,000 Palestinian children in the course of the intifada.

Israelis say rock-throwing children are a real threat to public safety and add that the Palestinians have made cynical use of youngsters to gain international sympathy. Gunfire, beatings and concentrated tear gas are necessary, assert Israeli authorities, to keep order.

To see why this is a specious argument, one need only take a look at South Korea. There, radical students have made massive and truly frightening street rioting into a fine art. In recent weeks, for example, student rioters have staged bitter clashes, attacking police with fire bombs, rocks, bottles, iron bars and ball bearings fired by sling shots.

Yet the well-trained South Korean riot police, decked out in protective gear that makes them look like medieval Japanese samurai, almost never respond with gunfire. They stoically take a pounding from missiles and Molotov cocktails, and then go on to slowly clear the streets with baton charges and karate kicks. In spite of all the flames and fury, casualties are minimal.

Israel's security forces are well-trained and disciplined. Israel is a leading world producer of riot gear, with South Africa as one of its main customers. The Israelis could contain Palestinian demonstrations in the same non-lethal manner as the South Koreans.

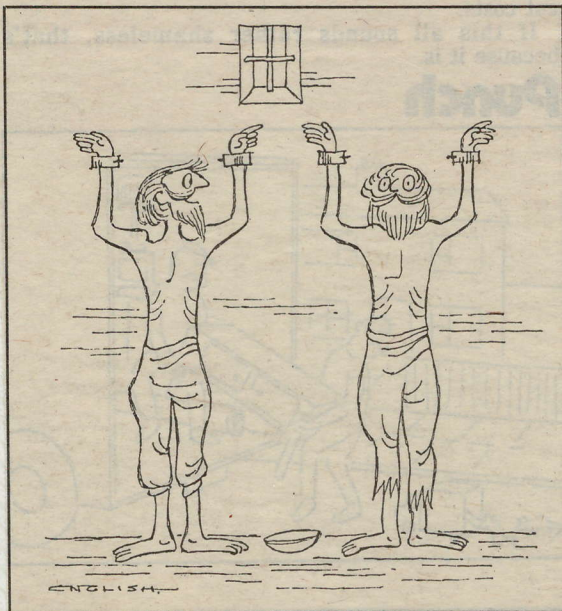
The Indian security forces, by contrast, are poorly trained, frightened and trigger-happy. At least they have some small excuse for opening fire on unarmed crowds. The Israelis do not.

In both cases, lethal response to demonstrators is an attempt to put down by force and fear what the politicians are unable to peacefully settle. Such policy is wrong on both ethincal and practical grounds. The Moslem intifadas in Kashmir, Palestine or, for that matter, the Yugoslav province of Kosovo, are not going to be suppressed by volleys of gunfire. Dead demonstrators become live martyrs in a spreading holy war.

The U.S. has condemned Israel for its use of excessive force. Canada, which provides Israel considerable aid by granting tax deductibility to donations going to Israel, should also raise its voice in protest.

Israel's far-right Likud government appears to have lost its reason and good sense in its overriding mania to annex the West Bank and Gaza at all costs. Many Israelis are deeply worried by the increasingly dangerous fanaticism of Israel's militant right and the feebleness of its moderate politicians. Israel's friends abroad need to bring the Likud government back to reality before the Mideast is plunged into a new round of war.

Olde English



"Stop me if you've heard this one . . ."