

Account of Israeli attack doesn't hold up to scrutiny

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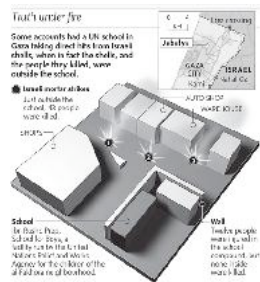
PATRICK MARTIN
FROM THURSDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
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JABALYA, GAZA STRIP — Most people remember the headlines: Massacre Of Innocents As UN School Is Shelled; Israeli Strike Kills Dozens At UN School.

They heralded the tragic news of Jan. 6, when mortar shells fired by advancing Israeli forces killed 43 civilians in the Jabalya refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. The victims, it was reported, had taken refuge inside the Ibn Rushd Preparatory School for Boys, a facility run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency.

The news shocked the world and was compared to the 1996 Israeli attack on a UN compound in Qana, Lebanon, in which more than 100 people seeking refuge were killed. It was certain to hasten the end of Israel's attack on Gaza, and would undoubtedly lead the list of allegations of war crimes committed by Israel.

There was just one problem: The story, as etched in people's minds, was not quite accurate.



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Physical evidence and interviews with several eyewitnesses, including a teacher who was in the schoolyard at the time of the shelling, make it clear: While a few people were injured from shrapnel landing inside the white-and-blue-walled UNRWA compound, no one in the compound was killed. The 43 people who died in the incident were all outside, on the street, where all three mortar shells landed.

Stories of one or more shells landing inside the schoolyard were inaccurate.

While the killing of 43 civilians on the street may itself be grounds for investigation, it falls short of the act of shooting into a schoolyard crowded with refuge-seekers.

The teacher who was in the compound at the time of the shelling says he heard three loud blasts, one after the other, then a lot of screaming. "I ran in the direction of the screaming [inside the compound]," he said. "I could see some of the people had been injured, cut. I picked up one girl who was bleeding by her eye, and ran out on the street to get help." But when I got outside, it was crazy hell. There were bodies everywhere, people dead, injured, flesh everywhere."

The teacher, who refused to give his name because he said UNRWA had told the staff not to talk to the news media, was adamant: "Inside [the compound] there were 12 injured, but there were no dead."

"Three of my students were killed," he said. "But they were all outside."

Hazem Balousha, who runs an auto-body shop across the road from the UNRWA school, was down the street, just out of range of the shrapnel, when the three shells hit. He showed a reporter where they landed: one to the right of his shop, one to the left, and one right in front.

"There were only three," he said. "They were all out here on the road."

News of the tragedy travelled fast, with aid workers and medical staff quoted as saying the incident happened at the school, the UNRWA facility where people had sought refuge.

Soon it was presented that people in the school compound had been killed. Before long,

there was worldwide outrage.

Sensing a public-relations nightmare, Israeli spokespeople quickly asserted that their forces had only returned fire from gunmen inside the school. (They even named two militants.) It was a statement from which they would later retreat, saying there were gunmen in the vicinity of the school.

No witnesses said they saw any gunmen. (If people had seen anyone firing a mortar from the middle of the street outside the school, they likely would not have continued to mill around.)

John Ging, UNRWA's operations director in Gaza, acknowledged in an interview this week that all three Israeli mortar shells landed outside the school and that "no one was killed in the school."

"I told the Israelis that none of the shells landed in the school," he said.

Why would he do that?

"Because they had told everyone they had returned fire from gunmen in the school. That wasn't true."

Mr. Ging blames the Israelis for the confusion over where the victims were killed. "They even came out with a video that purported to show gunmen in the schoolyard. But we had seen it before," he said, "in 2007."

The Israelis are the ones, he said, who got everyone thinking the deaths occurred inside the school.

"Look at my statements," he said. "I never said anyone was killed in the school. Our officials never made any such allegation."

Speaking from Shifa Hospital in Gaza City as the bodies were being brought in that night, an emotional Mr. Ging did say: "Those in the school were all families seeking refuge. ... There's nowhere safe in Gaza."

And in its daily bulletin, the World Health Organization reported: "On 6 January, 42 people were killed following an attack on a UNRWA school ..."

The UN's Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs got the location right, for a short while. Its daily bulletin cited "early reports" that "three artillery shells landed outside the UNRWA Jabalia Prep. C Girls School ...". However, its more comprehensive weekly report, published three days later, stated that "Israeli shelling directly hit two UNRWA schools ..." including the one at issue.

Such official wording helps explain the widespread news reports of the deaths in the school, but not why the UN agencies allowed the misconception to linger.

"I know no one was killed in the school," Mr. Ging said. "But 41 innocent people were killed in the street outside the school. Many of those people had taken refuge in the school and wandered out onto the street.

"The state of Israel still has to answer for that. What did they know and what care did they take?"

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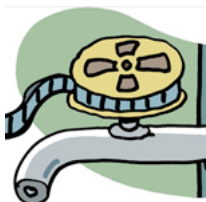
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