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Death in the Afternoon

By Keith B. Richburg
Washington Post Foreign Service
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NABLUS, West Bank, Oct. 20 — Just after noon prayers, thousands gathered in this crowded and dusty town to bury the latest casualty, a 34-year-old father of four, who was killed Thursday by Israeli gunfire. As he was laid to rest, AK-47 assault rifles were fired into the air while mourners shouted "God is Great!" and pledged to avenge his death.

"Barak, you pig! They need to put you on a chain!" chanted the women and girls, referring to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. Some clenched their fists or thrust two fingers high in a "V" sign, for victory. "We're willing to die for our cause, all of us, women and children!" one man shouted. An elderly woman cried out, "No peace and no surrender!"

It was 1 p.m.

And then they began to march, from the grave site through the streets, past mostly shuttered shops, to the edge of Nablus, where Palestinian guards stood at a checkpoint of barrels and sandbags about 100 yards away from Israeli troops at the edge of an Israeli-controlled zone.

It was 2:05 p.m.

At the Palestinian checkpoint, the slow march became a trot. Some young men, teenagers mostly, reached into their pockets and pulled out



Palestinians grieve Friday over the body of Zahi al-Ardah, who was killed in a shootout with Jewish settlers in Nablus on the West Bank. (AFP)

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slingshots. On the side of the road, they gathered large stones. The Palestinian policemen stood to the side and let them pass, not helping and not interfering, mostly just watching. Behind the Palestinian checkpoint, five ambulances from the Red Crescent Society stood by.

A tire was set on fire about 50 yards from the Israeli position. Stones were fired from slingshots, none coming close to the Israelis sitting inside a jeep with wire mesh over the windows. A white-haired, 56-year-old economics professor, Yousef A. Haq, showed a foreign reporter the best place to stand, next to a concrete wall on a hill overlooking the action. He has become something of an expert, coming to this spot every Friday to watch. Three of his students have been killed since Gaza and the West Bank exploded in violence Sept. 29.

"Maybe in countries where there is freedom, they watch football and basketball," he said. "Here we have struggle. Our struggle is my football and basketball."

As he spoke, the first shot rang out--a loud crack coming from the direction of the Israeli checkpoint.

It was 2:35 p.m.

Another crack of weapons fire was heard, then another. Then the scattered pops became a burst, this time coming from the tree line on the hill. One young Palestinian went down, blood gushing from behind his ear. But he was alive, grazed by a ricochet. He was not yet what the Palestinians call a martyr.

A young man shouted and pointed to a rooftop on the hill. Four small figures, Israeli soldiers, had taken positions behind the parapet and were seen taking aim. The crack-crack-crack of automatic weapons fire cut through the air, and two young men went down. One was shot in the thigh and was carried away on a stretcher. The other was shot in the forehead, between the eyes. His companions carried his limp body down the hill; he was the day's first fatality.

As the two victims were carried away, four teenagers crouched behind a bush, filling small orange juice bottles with gasoline and stuffing the tops with rags. When their makeshift bombs were complete, they climbed the low hill through the shrubs, trying to sneak up on the Israeli checkpoint in front. Their colleagues tried a diversion; they marched and shouted directly in front of the Israelis' jeep, jeering, taunting, waving flags--several green flags for the Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas, and a yellow flag for Hezbollah, the Lebanese-based Shiite Muslim movement holding Israeli soldiers hostage.

It was 3:10 p.m.

Suddenly from the far right, in the hills, came a burst of automatic weapons fire that sent the young men on the hill into temporary retreat. Some pointed to the hilltop, warning that Israeli sharpshooters were there. Then came a rapid burst of what sounded like heavy machine-gun fire. One long burst, then another. Two more young men fell, one shot in the head.

Back past the Palestinian police checkpoint, the Red Crescent set up a field hospital in the wide driveway of a sign-making company. Six mats were laid on the ground and bags of intravenous drip dangled from stands. A doctor displayed metal fragments she had removed from the victims.

"One was shot in the forehead," she said. "They are deciding now whether to operate or not. His brain is dead, but his heart is still beating."

The automatic weapons fire came closer, and from all directions—from the Israeli checkpoint, from the concrete house on the hill and from the tree line. Ambulances raced back and forth, collecting wounded from an increasingly chaotic battleground. No fire had been heard coming from the Palestinian side. But other reporters said they saw young Palestinians shooting from behind a wall—and that their shots had started the gunfire.

It was 4 p.m.

One man came back on a stretcher, shot in the stomach. A Palestinian policeman, wearing a chocolate-chip-looking camouflage uniform and still cradling his assault rifle, was brought in with a bullet in his leg. Another Palestinian policeman in green fatigues was carried in. Someone shouted, "They shoot children, civilians, soldiers, anybody!"

Then the ambulances brought in a young boy with the back of his head missing. Behind him, friends ran in, shouting and carrying a piece of cardboard. On the cardboard were pieces of the boy's brains they had scooped off a wall.

Two boys, ages 15 and 16, said they were crouching behind a concrete wall with the other boy, who they thought was 14 and lived in a refugee camp, although they were unsure. A bullet struck the wall beside them, and the 14-year-old went over to try to dig it out as a souvenir.

"He went to see the bullet that went in the wall," the 16-year-old said breathlessly. "He wanted to see if he could get it out. I told him not to go, but he went to get the bullet."

They shot him, the two boys said at once. "His brains got stuck on the wall. He got stuck on the wall."

The crowd around the field hospital was in a frenzy of rage. Some young men, volunteers helping the doctors, linked arms to try to keep back the

mob, which pressed in for a glimpse of the boy. One man shoved an armed Palestinian policeman and screamed, "What the hell do you have guns for? Why don't you use them?"

There was more shoving, more shouting. More bursts of automatic weapons fire. And more casualties brought in.

The final count in Nablus was at least five dead, perhaps six, and dozens injured. Overall, at least 10 Palestinians were killed in clashes with Israeli troops today. And so Saturday will see more funerals for more Palestinians. And from the funerals, townspeople will march to the checkpoints with their rocks and molotov cocktails.

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