

Video: Ten Years Ago, Rachel Corrie: Death of an Idealist, Witness of Israeli Crimes against Humanity

Documentary Film of The Week - Rachel Was Run Over & Killed by An Israeli Army Bulldozer on March 16th, 2003 - 15 Years Ago

By [Rachel Corrie](#)

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In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Rachel Corrie was a 23-year-old American peace activist from Olympia, Washington, who was crushed to death by an Israeli army bulldozer on March 16th, 2003, while undertaking nonviolent direct action to protect the home of a Palestinian family from demolition.

Since her killing, an enormous amount of solidarity activities have been carried out in her name around the world. This film asks what drove Rachel to become a peace activist.

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Below are Rachel's emails to her family while she was in Palestine.

February 7th, 2003

Hi Friends and Family and Others,



I have been in Palestine for two weeks and one hour now, and I still have very few words to describe what I see. It is most difficult for me to think about what's going on here when I sit down to write back to the United States.

Something about the virtual portal into luxury. I don't know if many of the children here have ever existed without tank-shell holes in their walls and the towers of an occupying army surveying them constantly from the near horizons. I think, although I'm not entirely sure, that even the smallest of these children understand that life is not like this everywhere.

An eight-year-old was shot and killed by an Israeli tank two days before I got here, and many of the children murmur his name to me - Ali - or point at the posters of him on the walls. The children also love to get me to practice my limited Arabic by asking me, "Kaif Sharon?" "Kaif Bush?" and they laugh when I say, "Bush Majnoon", "Sharon Majnoon" back in my limited arabic. (How is Sharon? How is Bush? Bush is crazy. Sharon is crazy.) Of course this isn't quite what I believe, and some of the adults who have the English correct me: "Bush mish Majnoon" ... Bush is a businessman. Today I tried to learn to say, "Bush is a tool," but I don't think it translated quite right. But anyway, there are eight-year-olds here much more aware of the workings of the global power structure than I was just a few years ago.

Nevertheless, no amount of reading, attendance at conferences, documentary viewing and word of mouth could have prepared me for the reality of the situation here. You just can't imagine it unless you see it - and even then you are always well aware that your experience of it is not at all the reality: what with the difficulties the Israeli army would face if they shot an unarmed US citizen, and with the fact that I have money to buy water when the army destroys wells, and the fact, of course, that I have the option of leaving. Nobody in my family has been shot, driving in their car, by a rocket launcher from a tower at the end of a major street in my hometown.

I have a home. I am allowed to go see the ocean. Ostensibly it is still quite difficult for me to be held for months or years on end without a trial (this because I am a white US citizen, as opposed to so many others). When I leave for school or work I can be relatively certain that there will not be a heavily armed soldier waiting halfway between Mud Bay and downtown Olympia at a checkpoint with the power to decide whether I can go about my business, and whether I can get home again when I'm done. So, if I feel outrage at arriving and entering briefly and incompletely into the world in which these children exist, I wonder conversely about how it would be for them to arrive in my world.

They know that children in the United States don't usually have their parents shot and they know they sometimes get to see the ocean. But once you have seen the ocean and lived in a silent place, where water is taken for granted and not stolen in the night by bulldozers, and once you have spent an evening when you haven't wondered if the walls of your home might suddenly fall inward waking you from your sleep, and once you've met people who have never lost anyone once you have experienced the reality of a world that isn't surrounded by murderous towers, tanks, armed "settlements" and now a giant metal wall, I wonder if you can forgive the world for all the years of your childhood spent existing-just existing-in resistance to the constant stranglehold of the world's fourth largest military-backed by the world's only superpower-in its attempt to erase you from your home. That is something I wonder about these children. I wonder what would happen if they really knew. As an afterthought to all this rambling, I am in Rafah: a city of about 140,000 people, approximately 60% of whom are refugees - many of whom are twice or three times refugees. Rafah existed prior to 1948, but most of the people here are themselves or are descendants of people who were relocated here from their homes in historic Palestine-now Israel. Rafah was split in half when the Sinai returned to Egypt.

Currently, the Israeli army is building a fourteen-meter-high wall between Rafah in Palestine and the border, carving a no-mans land from the houses along the border. Six hundred and two homes have been completely bulldozed according to the Rafah Popular Refugee Committee. The number of homes that have been partially destroyed is greater. Rafah existed prior to 1948, but most of the people here are themselves or are descendants of people who were relocated here from their homes in historic Palestine-now Israel. Rafah was split in half when the Sinai returned to Egypt.

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Something disturbing about this friendly curiosity. It reminded me of how much, to some degree, we are all kids curious about other kids. Egyptian kids shouting at strange women wandering into the path of tanks. Palestinian kids shot from the tanks when they peak out from behind walls to see what's going on. International kids standing in front of tanks with banners. Israeli kids in the tanks anonymously - occasionally shouting and also occasionally waving - many forced to be here, many just aggressive - shooting into the houses as we wander away.

In addition to the constant presence of tanks along the border and in the western region between Rafah and settlements along the coast, there are more IDF towers here than I can count-along the horizon, at the end of streets. Some just army green metal. Others these strange spiral staircases draped in some kind of netting to make the activity within anonymous. Some hidden, just beneath the horizon of buildings. A new one went up the other day in the time it took us to do laundry and to cross town twice to hang banners.



Despite the fact that some of the areas nearest the border are the original Rafah with families who have lived on this land for at least a century, only the 1948 camps in the center of the city are Palestinian controlled areas under Oslo. But as far as I can tell, there are few if any places that are not within the sights of some tower or another. Certainly there is no place invulnerable to apache helicopters or to the cameras of invisible drones we hear buzzing over the city for hours at a time.

I've been having trouble accessing news about the outside world here, but I hear an escalation of war on Iraq is inevitable. There is a great deal of concern here about the "reoccupation of Gaza". Gaza is reoccupied every day to various extents but I think the fear is that the tanks will enter all the streets and remain here instead of entering some of the streets and then withdrawing after some hours or days to observe and shoot from the edges of the communities. If people aren't already thinking about the consequences of this war for the people of the entire region then I hope you will start. I also hope you'll come here. We've been wavering between five and six internationals. The neighborhoods that have asked us for some form of presence are Yibna, Tel El Sultan, Hi Salam, Brazil, Block J, Zorob, and Block O. There is also need for constant nighttime presence at a well on the outskirts of Rafah since the Israeli army destroyed the two largest wells.

According to the municipal water office the wells destroyed last week provided half of Rafah's water supply. Many of the communities have requested internationals to be present at night to attempt to shield houses from further demolition. After about ten p.m. it is very difficult to move at night because the Israeli army treats anyone in the streets as resistance and shoots at them. So clearly we are too few.

I continue to believe that my home, Olympia, could gain a lot and offer a lot by deciding to make a commitment to Rafah in the form of a sister-community relationship. Some teachers and children's groups have expressed interest in e-mail exchanges, but this is only the tip of the iceberg of solidarity work that might be done.

Many people want their voices to be heard, and I think we need to use some of our privilege as internationals to get those voices heard directly in the US, rather than through the filter of well-meaning internationals such as myself. I am just beginning to learn, from what I expect to be a very intense tutelage, about the ability of people to organize against all odds, and to resist against all odds.

Thanks for the news I've been getting from friends in the US. I just read a report back from a friend who organized a peace group in Shelton, Washington, and was able to be part of a delegation to the large January 18th protest in Washington DC.

People here watch the media, and they told me again today that there have been large protests in the United States and "problems for the government" in the UK. So thanks for allowing me to not feel like a complete Polyanna when I tentatively tell people here that many people in the United States do not support the policies of our government, and that we are learning from global examples how to resist.

My love to everyone. My love to my mom. My love to smooch. My love to fg and barnhair and sesamees and Lincoln School. My love to Olympia.

Rachel

February 20th, 2003

Mama,

Now the Israeli army has actually dug up the road to Gaza, and both of the major checkpoints are closed. This means that Palestinians who want to go and register for their next quarter at university can't. People can't get to their jobs and those who are trapped on the other side can't get home; and internationals, who have a meeting tomorrow in the West Bank, won't make it.

We could probably make it through if we made serious use of our international white person privilege, but that would also mean some risk of arrest and deportation, even though none of us has done anything illegal.

The Gaza Strip is divided in thirds now. There is some talk about the "reoccupation of Gaza", but I seriously doubt this will happen, because I think it would be a geopolitically stupid move for Israel right now. I think the more likely thing is an increase in smaller below-the-international-outcry-radar incursions and possibly the oft-hinted "population transfer".

I am staying put in Rafah for now, no plans to head north. I still feel like I'm relatively safe and think that my most likely risk in case of a larger-scale incursion is arrest. A move to reoccupy Gaza would generate a much larger outcry than Sharon's assassination-during-peace-negotiations/land grab strategy, which is working very well now to create settlements

all over, slowly but surely eliminating any meaningful possibility for Palestinian self-determination. Know that I have a lot of very nice Palestinians looking after me. I have a small flu bug, and got some very nice lemony drinks to cure me. Also, the woman who keeps the key for the well where we still sleep keeps asking me about you.

She doesn't speak a bit of English, but she asks about my mom pretty frequently - wants to make sure I'm calling you.

Love to you and Dad and Sarah and Chris and everybody.

Rachel

February 27th, 2003

(To Her Mother)

Love you. Really miss you. I have bad nightmares about tanks and bulldozers outside our house and you and me inside. Sometimes the adrenaline acts as an anesthetic for weeks and then in the evening or at night it just hits me again - a little bit of the reality of the situation. I am really scared for the people here. Yesterday, I watched a father lead his two tiny children, holding his hands, out into the sight of tanks and a sniper tower and bulldozers and Jeeps because he thought his house was going to be exploded.

Jenny and I stayed in the house with several women and two small babies. It was our mistake in translation that caused him to think it was his house that was being exploded. In fact, the Israeli army was in the process of detonating an explosive in the ground nearby - one that appears to have been planted by Palestinian resistance.

This is in the area where Sunday about 150 men were rounded up and contained outside the settlement with gunfire over their heads and around them, while tanks and bulldozers destroyed 25 greenhouses - the livelihoods for 300 people. The explosive was right in front of the greenhouses - right in the point of entry for tanks that might come back again. I was terrified to think that this man felt it was less of a risk to walk out in view of the tanks with his kids than to stay in his house. I was really scared that they were all going to be shot and I tried to stand between them and the tank. This happens every day, but just this father walking out with his two little kids just looking very sad, just happened to get my attention more at this particular moment, probably because I felt it was our translation problems that made him leave.

I thought a lot about what you said on the phone about Palestinian violence not helping the situation. Sixty thousand workers from Rafah worked in Israel two years ago. Now only 600 can go to Israel for jobs. Of these 600, many have moved, because the three checkpoints between here and Ashkelon (the closest city in Israel) make what used to be a 40-minute drive, now a 12-hour or impassible journey. In addition, what Rafah identified in 1999 as sources of economic growth are all completely destroyed - the Gaza international airport (runways demolished, totally closed); the border for trade with Egypt (now with a giant Israeli sniper tower in the middle of the crossing); access to the ocean (completely cut off in the last two years by a checkpoint and the Gush Katif settlement). The count of homes destroyed in Rafah since the beginning of this intifada is up around 600, by and large people with no connection to the resistance but who happen to live along the border. I think it is

maybe official now that Rafah is the poorest place in the world. There used to be a middle class here – recently. We also get reports that in the past, Gazan flower shipments to Europe were delayed for two weeks at the Erez crossing for security inspections. You can imagine the value of two-week-old cut flowers in the European market, so that market dried up. And then the bulldozers come and take out people’s vegetable farms and gardens. What is left for people? Tell me if you can think of anything.

I can’t.

If any of us had our lives and welfare completely strangled, lived with children in a shrinking place where we knew, because of previous experience, that soldiers and tanks and bulldozers could come for us at any moment and destroy all the greenhouses that we had been cultivating for however long, and did this while some of us were beaten and held captive with 149 other people for several hours – do you think we might try to use somewhat violent means to protect whatever fragments remained? I think about this especially when I see orchards and greenhouses and fruit trees destroyed – just years of care and cultivation. I think about you and how long it takes to make things grow and what a labour of love it is. I really think, in a similar situation, most people would defend themselves as best they could. I think Uncle Craig would. I think probably Grandma would. I think I would. You asked me about non-violent resistance.

When that explosive detonated yesterday it broke all the windows in the family’s house. I was in the process of being served tea and playing with the two small babies. I’m having a hard time right now. Just feel sick to my stomach a lot from being doted on all the time, very sweetly, by people who are facing doom. I know that from the United States, it all sounds like hyperbole. Honestly, a lot of the time the sheer kindness of the people here, coupled with the overwhelming evidence of the wilful destruction of their lives, makes it seem unreal to me. I really can’t believe that something like this can happen in the world without a bigger outcry about it. It really hurts me, again, like it has hurt me in the past, to witness how awful we can allow the world to be. I felt after talking to you that maybe you didn’t completely believe me. I think it’s actually good if you don’t, because I do believe pretty much above all else in the importance of independent critical thinking. And I also realise that with you I’m much less careful than usual about trying to source every assertion that I make.

A lot of the reason for that is I know that you actually do go and do your own research. But it makes me worry about the job I’m doing. All of the situation that I tried to enumerate above – and a lot of other things – constitutes a somewhat gradual – often hidden, but nevertheless massive – removal and destruction of the ability of a particular group of people to survive. This is what I am seeing here. The assassinations, rocket attacks and shooting of children are atrocities – but in focusing on them I’m terrified of missing their context. The vast majority of people here – even if they had the economic means to escape, even if they actually wanted to give up resisting on their land and just leave (which appears to be maybe the less nefarious of Sharon’s possible goals), can’t leave. Because they can’t even get into Israel to apply for visas, and because their destination countries won’t let them in (both our country and Arab countries). So I think when all means of survival is cut off in a pen (Gaza) which people can’t get out of, I think that qualifies as genocide. Even if they could get out, I think it would still qualify as genocide. Maybe you could look up the definition of genocide according to international law. I don’t remember it right now. I’m going to get better at illustrating this, hopefully. I don’t like to use those charged words. I think you know this about me. I really value words. I really try to illustrate and let people draw their own

conclusions.

Anyway, I'm rambling. Just want to write to my Mom and tell her that I'm witnessing this chronic, insidious genocide and I'm really scared, and questioning my fundamental belief in the goodness of human nature. This has to stop. I think it is a good idea for us all to drop everything and devote our lives to making this stop. I don't think it's an extremist thing to do anymore. I still really want to dance around to Pat Benatar and have boyfriends and make comics for my coworkers. But I also want this to stop. Disbelief and horror is what I feel. Disappointment. I am disappointed that this is the base reality of our world and that we, in fact, participate in it. This is not at all what I asked for when I came into this world. This is not at all what the people here asked for when they came into this world. This is not the world you and Dad wanted me to come into when you decided to have me. This is not what I meant when I looked at Capital Lake and said: "This is the wide world and I'm coming to it." I did not mean that I was coming into a world where I could live a comfortable life and possibly, with no effort at all, exist in complete unawareness of my participation in genocide. More big explosions somewhere in the distance outside.

When I come back from Palestine, I probably will have nightmares and constantly feel guilty for not being here, but I can channel that into more work. Coming here is one of the better things I've ever done. So when I sound crazy, or if the Israeli military should break with their racist tendency not to injure white people, please pin the reason squarely on the fact that I am in the midst of a genocide which I am also indirectly supporting, and for which my government is largely responsible. I love you and Dad. Sorry for the diatribe. OK, some strange men next to me just gave me some peas, so I need to eat and thank them.

Rachel

February 28th, 2003

(To Her Mother)

Thanks, Mom, for your response to my email. It really helps me to get word from you, and from other people who care about me.

After I wrote to you I went incommunicado from the affinity group for about 10 hours which I spent with a family on the front line in Hi Salam - who fixed me dinner - and have cable TV. The two front rooms of their house are unusable because gunshots have been fired through the walls, so the whole family - three kids and two parents - sleep in the parent's bedroom. I sleep on the floor next to the youngest daughter, Iman, and we all shared blankets. I helped the son with his English homework a little, and we all watched Pet Semetary, which is a horrifying movie. I think they all thought it was pretty funny how much trouble I had watching it. Friday is the holiday, and when I woke up they were watching Gummy Bears dubbed into Arabic. So I ate breakfast with them and sat there for a while and just enjoyed being in this big puddle of blankets with this family watching what for me seemed like Saturday morning cartoons. Then I walked some way to B'razil, which is where Nidal and Mansur and Grandmother and Rafat and all the rest of the big family that has really wholeheartedly adopted me live. (The other day, by the way, Grandmother gave me a pantomimed lecture in Arabic that involved a lot of blowing and pointing to her black shawl. I got Nidal to tell her that my mother would appreciate knowing that someone here was

giving me a lecture about smoking turning my lungs black.) I met their sister-in-law, who is visiting from Nusserat camp, and played with her small baby.

Nidal's English gets better every day. He's the one who calls me, "My sister". He started teaching Grandmother how to say, "Hello. How are you?" In English. You can always hear the tanks and bulldozers passing by, but all of these people are genuinely cheerful with each other, and with me. When I am with Palestinian friends I tend to be somewhat less horrified than when I am trying to act in a role of human rights observer, documenter, or direct-action resister. They are a good example of how to be in it for the long haul. I know that the situation gets to them - and may ultimately get them - on all kinds of levels, but I am nevertheless amazed at their strength in being able to defend such a large degree of their humanity - laughter, generosity, family-time - against the incredible horror occurring in their lives and against the constant presence of death. I felt much better after this morning. I spent a lot of time writing about the disappointment of discovering, somewhat first-hand, the degree of evil of which we are still capable. I should at least mention that I am also discovering a degree of strength and of basic ability for humans to remain human in the direst of circumstances - which I also haven't seen before. I think the word is dignity. I wish you could meet these people. Maybe, hopefully, someday you will.

Continuation of Her Email to Her Mother, February 28th, 2003

I think I could see a Palestinian state or a democratic Israeli-Palestinian state within my lifetime. I think freedom for Palestine could be an incredible source of hope to people struggling all over the world. I think it could also be an incredible inspiration to Arab people in the Middle East, who are struggling under undemocratic regimes which the US supports. I look forward to increasing numbers of middle-class privileged people like you and me becoming aware of the structures that support our privilege and beginning to support the work of those who aren't privileged to dismantle those structures.

I look forward to more moments like February 15 when civil society wakes up en masse and issues massive and resonant evidence of it's conscience, it's unwillingness to be repressed, and it's compassion for the suffering of others. I look forward to more teachers emerging like Matt Grant and Barbara Weaver and Dale Knuth who teach critical thinking to kids in the United States. I look forward to the international resistance that's occurring now fertilizing analysis on all kinds of issues, with dialogue between diverse groups of people. I look forward to all of us who are new at this developing better skills for working in democratic structures and healing our own racism and classism and sexism and heterosexism and ageism and ableism and becoming more effective.

One other thing - I think this a lot about public protest - like the one a few weeks ago here that was attended by only about 150 people. Whenever I organize or participate in public protest I get really worried that it will just suck, be really small, embarrassing, and the media will laugh at me. Oftentimes, it is really small and most of the time the media laughs at us.

The weekend after our 150-person protest we were invited to a maybe 2,000 person protest. Even though we had a small protest and of course it didn't get coverage all over the world, in some places the word "Rafah" was mentioned outside of the Arab press. Colin got a sign in English and Arabic into the protest in Seattle that said "Olympia says no to war on Rafah

and Iraq". His pictures went up on the Rafah-today website that a guy named Mohammed here runs. People here and elsewhere saw those pictures.

I think about Glen going out every Friday for ten years with tagboard signs that addressed the number of children dead from sanctions in Iraq. Sometimes just one or two people there and everyone thought they were crazy and they got spit upon. Now there are a lot more people on Friday evenings.

The juncture between 4th and State is just lined with them, and they get a lot of honks and waves, and thumbs ups. They created an infrastructure there for other people to do something. Getting spit on, they made it easier for someone else to decide that they could write a letter to the editor, or stand at the back of a rally - or do something that seems slightly less ridiculous than standing at the side of the road addressing the deaths of children in Iraq and getting spit upon.

Just hearing about what you are doing makes me feel less alone, less useless, less invisible. Those honks and waves help. The pictures help. Colin helps. The international media and our government are not going to tell us that we are effective, important, justified in our work, courageous, intelligent, valuable. We have to do that for each other, and one way we can do that is by continuing our work, visibly.

I also think it's important for people in the United States in relative privilege to realize that people without privilege will be doing this work no matter what, because they are working for their lives. We can work with them, and they know that we work with them, or we can leave them to do this work themselves and curse us for our complicity in killing them. I really don't get the sense that anyone here curses us.

I also get the sense that people here, in particular, are actually more concerned in the immediate about our comfort and health than they are about us risking our lives on their behalf. At least that's the case for me. People try to give me a lot of tea and food in the midst of gunfire and explosive-detonation.

I love you,

Rachel

Rachel's Last Email

Hi Papa,

Thank you for your email. I feel like sometimes I spend all my time propogandizing mom, and assuming she'll pass stuff on to you, so you get neglected. Don't worry about me too much, right now I am most concerned that we are not being effective. I still don't feel particularly at risk. Rafah has seemed calmer lately, maybe because the military is preoccupied with incursions in the north - still shooting and house demolitions - one death this week that I know of, but not any larger incursions. Still can't say how this will change if and when war with Iraq comes.

Thanks also for stepping up your anti-war work. I know it is not easy to do, and probably much more difficult where you are than where I am. I am really interested in talking to the

journalist in Charlotte – let me know what I can do to speed the process along. I am trying to figure out what I’m going to do when I leave here, and when I’m going to leave. Right now I think I could stay until June, financially. I really don’t want to move back to Olympia, but do need to go back there to clean my stuff out of the garage and talk about my experiences here. On the other hand, now that I’ve crossed the ocean I’m feeling a strong desire to try to stay across the ocean for some time. Considering trying to get English teaching jobs – would like to really buckle down and learn Arabic.

Also got an invitation to visit Sweden on my way back – which I think I could do very cheaply. I would like to leave Rafah with a viable plan to return, too. One of the core members of our group has to leave tomorrow – and watching her say goodbye to people is making me realize how difficult it will be. People here can’t leave, so that complicates things. They also are pretty matter-of-fact about the fact that they don’t know if they will be alive when we come back here.

I really don’t want to live with a lot of guilt about this place – being able to come and go so easily – and not going back. I think it is valuable to make commitments to places – so I would like to be able to plan on coming back here within a year or so. Of all of these possibilities I think it’s most likely that I will at least go to Sweden for a few weeks on my way back – I can change tickets and get a plane to from Paris to Sweden and back for a total of around 150 bucks or so. I know I should really try to link up with the family in France – but I really think that I’m not going to do that. I think I would just be angry the whole time and not much fun to be around. It also seems like a transition into too much opulence right now – I would feel a lot of class guilt the whole time as well. Let me know if you have any ideas about what I should do with the rest of my life. I love you very much. If you want you can write to me as if I was on vacation at a camp on the big island of Hawaii learning to weave. One thing I do to make things easier here is to utterly retreat into fantasies that I am in a Hollywood movie or a sitcom starring Michael J Fox. So feel free to make something up and I’ll be happy to play along.

Much love Poppy.

Rachel

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