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Israelis take last Palestinian stronghold

JENIN REFUGEE CAMP, West Bank (AP) — Palestinian militants booby-trapped every place they thought Israeli troops might be caught off-guard — doorways, roadside sewers, even women's purses.

In round-the-clock gunbattles that roared for eight days, Israeli troops inched their way through the narrow streets and alleys of Jenin refugee camp, toward strongholds of Palestinian gunmen, bulldozing rows of houses that blocked their armored vehicles.

Trapped inside cramped cinderblock homes, with water and electricity cut and food supplies dwindling, terrified residents endured a hellish week of fighting that made this impoverished camp look like it was hit by a powerful earthquake.

The last holdouts, 36 Palestinian gunmen who had exhausted their bullets and food, surrendered at dawn Thursday, and Israeli troops now have full control of the badly chewed up streets in a camp the size of a few city blocks set on a sloping hillside.

Yet Israelis and Palestinians are still waging a verbal battle over what happened inside the camp, scene of the most ferocious single battle in more than 18 months of Mideast fighting.

The Israeli military suffered 23 dead — by far its highest total in any one battle. The army says it killed about 100 Palestinians, mostly militants.

However, the location of the Palestinian dead remains a mystery.

Palestinian officials, including Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo, have talked about mass killings of civilians, without providing evidence.

In a first comprehensive look at the devastation in the camp, Associated Press journalists found widespread destruction but no bodies on the streets.

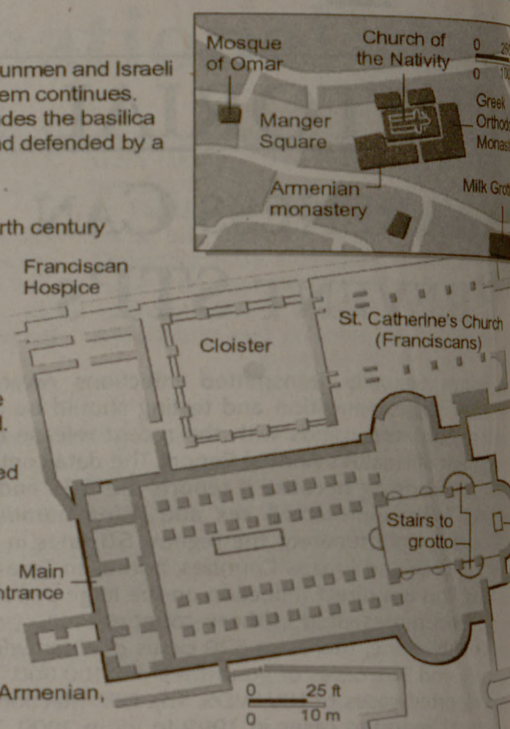
Several Palestinian men gave journalists a tour of the

Church of the Nativity

The dangerous standoff between Palestinian gunmen and Israeli forces at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem continues. Throughout its history, the church, which includes the basilica and several monasteries, has been seized and defended by a succession of armies.

History

- ▶ The original basilica was erected in the fourth century by Emperor Constantine over the site traditionally said to be Jesus' birthplace.
- ▶ Church was badly damaged in the Samaritan Revolt of A.D. 529.
- ▶ It was rebuilt in A.D. 527-565 during the reign of Emperor Justinian.
- ▶ During the Persian invasion of A.D. 614, the Church of the Nativity was the only one spared.
- ▶ Muslim and later Crusader armies in the 11th and 12th centuries seized and defended the church.
- ▶ Church was badly damaged by an earthquake in 1834 and fire in 1869.
- ▶ Over the years the church has been expanded by various Christian orders.
- ▶ The Palestinian Authority was given control of Bethlehem in 1995.
- ▶ Today, control is shared by Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic (Franciscans), Armenian, Coptic and Syrian Orthodox churches.



Grotto of the Nativity

The Grotto of the Nativity is the traditional site of the birth of Jesus Christ and has the greatest religious and historical significance within the church. Roman Catholics embedded a 14-point silver star in white marble over the birthplace in 1717. It was removed by the Greeks in 1847 and replaced by the Turkish government in 1835.

SOURCES: Brother Fabian Adkins, Commissariat of the Holy Land Franciscan Monastery; Bethlehem University; Associated Press

Susie Hoffmann, Hassan Hoppo

wreckage and said they had heard rumors that bodies were buried in mass graves, but did not know where.

Palestinian Cabinet minister Saeb Erekat said he received reports of 500 Palestinians killed in the offensive, but said he could not confirm the figure.

"We did not touch the Palestinian bodies, we did not remove them," said army spokesperson Lt. Col. Olivier Rafowicz. "This is Palestinian propaganda."

At the main hospital in Jenin, Dr. Mohammed Abu Ghali said he received eight

bodies during the first two days of fighting, but none, since, because the army sealed off the camp, keeping ambulances and rescue workers out.

For resident Ali Damaj, everything around him was in ruins.

During the battle, Palestinian gunmen fired from nearby buildings and alleys. As many as 50 people huddled inside his three-room apartment. "Keep on the floor. Keep quiet. Don't look out the windows," Damaj told the kids.

No one was hurt inside. But to the left of his apartment, a bulldozer plowed 50 yards

through the front of an apartment block, reducing it to a giant pile of broken concrete. Beds, tables and clothes were buried under knee-deep slabs of fractured concrete.

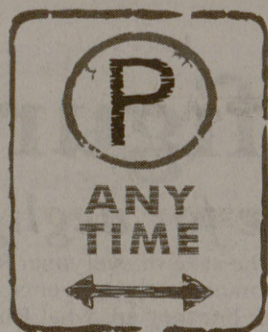
To the right, a bulldozer charged down an alley, shearing off the front wall of apartments on both sides of the street. Walking amid the debris offered a direct view into the front rooms of each home.

Along the back wall, carpets holding plates and glasses were unscathed. Diplomas and clocks hung from the damaged interior walls, a balcony but otherwise fine.

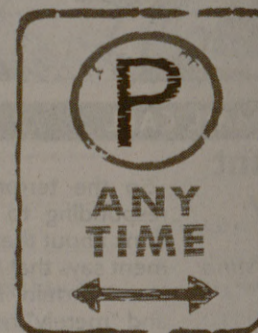
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