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Seven years after Rachel Corrie death, her parents sue Israel

Seven years after US activist Rachel Corrie was hit and killed by a bulldozer driven by an Israel soldier, her parents are suing the Israeli military for culpability in the incident.



Craig Corrie, the father of Rachel Corrie, and her sister Sarah stand outside the courtroom at Haifa District Court March 10. The family of Rachel Corrie, an American killed by an Israeli army bulldozer in Gaza, launched a damages case on Wednesday, stoking controversy over the treatment of pro-Palestinian protesters and angering Israelis frustrated by international criticism.
(Gil Cohen Magen/REUTERS/File)

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Rafah, Gaza Strip —
A 80-foot-deep entrance to an underground smuggling tunnel now marks the spot where US activist Rachel Corrie died seven years ago on March 16, 2003, crushed by an Israeli army bulldozer as she protested the demolition of a Palestinian family's home in Rafah at the Egypt-Gaza border.

On the anniversary of Ms. Corrie's death, Palestinians in Ramallah gathered to dedicate a street in her name while a civil suit brought by her parents against Israel's ministry of defense continues at a district court in the northern Israeli town of Haifa.

"The fact that the trial is happening in Israel is a plus," says Eytan Gilboa, a senior researcher at Israel's Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. "It has been a tragedy for the Corrie family and has caused a lot of damage to Israel in the court of international opinion. So it will say a lot about Israel's judicial system and if Israel is found guilty, then justice is justice."

Rachel's parents Cindy and Craig Corrie charge that the death of their 23-year-old daughter, who had traveled to the Gaza Strip from Olympia, Wash., with the activist group the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), occurred because of the Israeli army's intent or negligence – and they are seeking unspecified damages from the Israeli state.

Four witnesses who were at the scene when she died have since taken the stand at the civil trial, which began March 10.

They testified that Corrie, who initially knelt but then stood up in front of the bulldozer in order to prevent the home from being demolished, was in clear view of the Israeli soldier driving it before she was dragged underneath its blade.

An Israeli military investigation in the wake of her death in 2003 originally absolved the army, which occupied Gaza at the time, of any wrongdoing. The army concluded that the soldier who was driving the bulldozer did not see Rachel – who was that day wearing a fluorescent orange jacket.

Israelis divided

“I think that Israeli public opinion is very divided about the Rachel Corrie case,” says Meir Elran, who specializes in Israeli public opinion at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv.

“There are those who are more concerned about civil liberties, and those who are more nationalistic,” he continues. “And they are more likely to argue that the demonstrators provoked the army in what was then a military zone.”

Mr. Elran said that the trial, coupled with war crimes accusations and deteriorating relations with the US, will only add to the unsavory image he says Israel recently developed on the world stage.

“We hope this trial will illustrate the need for accountability for thousands of lives lost… by occupation,” the Corrie family said in a statement earlier this month.

The Corrie family’s lawyer, Hussein Abu Hussein, told reporters their case will be presented over a period of two weeks – but that he doesn’t expect a ruling until next year.

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