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Bodies were dragged in the streets for further abuse

By **BBC News Online's Martin Asser**

In video footage that will remain etched on memories for a long time to come, Israeli TV broadcast the lynching of Israeli soldiers by a furious Palestinian mob in the West Bank town of Ramallah.

The film, shot by an Italian television crew, showed dozens of enraged Palestinians storming the police station where the soldiers were being held after they had been captured by Palestinian police.

Gruesome scenes were visible through an open window as the mob savagely beat and stabbed two or possibly three of the soldiers to death.

Then a body was thrown from an upstairs window. The frenzied crowd clapped and cheered as more blows were rained down on the lifeless figure by the crowd outside.

Rising anger


Four men had been travelling in an unmarked car that was somehow apprehended on a street in Ramallah. At least two were killed a couple of hours later.



A Palestinian grabs one of the Israelis (who was in plain clothes)

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The Israeli army said they were army reservists who had taken a wrong turning and blundered into Ramallah where their car was apprehended.

Photographs show some of the doomed men were dressed in civilian clothes and one was photographed before his death wrapped in a black-and-white Palestinian head-dress.

Anger had been brewing for the last two weeks which have witnessed the funerals of about 100 Arabs, nearly two dozen of them children, who have been killed in the violent uprising against Israeli occupation forces.

But this outburst of fury apparently stemmed from rumours circulating through the mob that the captives belonged to the feared and hated undercover units of the Israeli army which dress as Arabs and strike in the heart of Palestinian towns.

Earlier this week, the badly beaten body of a Palestinian, Issam Hamad, was found dumped on the outskirts of Ramallah. Palestinians blamed his death on Israeli settlers.

Wrath of Israel

Whatever the truth, the brutal death of these men - in full glare of TV - will have a lasting impact on the Israeli population and abroad.

Their deaths were captured on film with the same power as the last moments of the short life of Muhammad al-Durrah, shot by Israeli troops 12 days ago as his father vainly tried to shield him with his own body.



Blood on their hands: One of the killers gestures to the crowd

In the immediate aftermath of the killings the crowds on the streets of Ramallah were jubilant, even though they knew what was coming.

Israel's overwhelming military might means that, unlike the Palestinians, it has the option of a dramatic and immediate response to those who cross its path.

The inevitable wrath of Israel came just as noon prayers were being called.



The bombed police station is backdrop for further demonstrations

Wave after wave of missiles rained down on Ramallah, as well

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as Palestinian Authority installations in Gaza.

The Palestinians called it war. An Israeli army spokesman said it was a limited operation intended as a "symbolic message" to the Palestinian leadership.

Israel holds Yasser Arafat directly responsible for the deaths of its men because his policeman did not prevent, and in some cases actually took part in, the lynching.

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