

PUBLIC

AI Index: MDE 15/047/2005

UA 248/05

Fear for safety / Excessive use of force / Land Rights

22 September 2005

**ISRAEL/
OCCUPIED
TERRITORIES**

Palestinian villagers and Israeli peace activists in Bil'in village in the West Bank

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of Palestinian villagers and Israeli peace activists in the West Bank village of Bil'in. Israeli forces are increasingly using excessive force against them as they demonstrate peacefully every week against the construction of the fence/wall which is cutting them off from most of their land and depriving them of their livelihood.

For several months the inhabitants of Bil'in have been repeatedly targeted by Israeli soldiers, border guards and undercover agents, who routinely try to prevent them from holding demonstrations and other non-violent activities. Israelis, as well as international peace activists, who join the Palestinian villagers every Friday in Bil'in are being similarly targeted and are frequently prevented from entering the village by Israeli forces.

Palestinians and Israelis protesters are assaulted and beaten every week by Israeli troops, who also use tear gas, stun grenades and rubber-coated metal bullets against the demonstrators. Dozens of demonstrators have been repeatedly arrested and accused of having attacked Israeli soldiers. Lawyers acting on their behalf have been able to secure the release of those arrested thanks to video footage which invariably proved that they had not used violence against Israeli forces and had in fact often been assaulted by them. However, some of the Palestinian villagers were only released on bail, pending trial, and risk being imprisoned as prisoners of conscience (see: <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/isr-action-POCs>). Israeli activists arrested in Bil'in are usually released without charge, but some have been banned from going back to Bil'in.

As well as using unwarranted force during the demonstrations, Israeli troops have increasingly prevented protesters from reaching the site of the demonstrations, near where the fence/wall is being built. They have also multiplied efforts to prevent Israeli activists from reaching Bil'in by declaring the village and surroundings "closed military areas". In recent weeks, these arbitrary closures have been imposed well in advance of the Friday demonstrations. The increasing efforts deployed by Israeli forces to prevent Israelis and international peace activists from joining the villagers in Bil'in is ostensibly intended to isolate the Palestinian villagers, and to deprive them of the presence of outside witnesses to the human rights abuses they suffer daily.

While Israeli peace activists are often prevented by the Israeli army from going to Bil'in to hold solidarity activities with the Palestinian villagers, Israeli settlers - who live near Bil'in and elsewhere in the West Bank in violation of international law - are allowed to move freely and to continue to appropriate Palestinian land. In this respect, it is notable that the route of the fence/wall near Bil'in, like elsewhere in the West Bank, has been designed to allow for maximum expansion of Israeli settlements, thereby appropriating more and more Palestinian land.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Bil'in is located in the West Bank, approximately five kilometres to the east of the Green Line (the demarcation line between Israel and the West Bank). Agriculture is the principal source of livelihood for Bil'in's some 1,700 inhabitants. The village has some 750 acres (3 km²) of olive and almond groves and grazing fields. Two thirds of it, some 500 acres (2 km²), are now being cut off from the village by the fence/wall. Being cut off from their land will mean economic devastation for the villagers of Bil'in.

The weekly Palestinian-Israeli demonstrations in Bil'in have become a symbol of non-violent protest and of solidarity. The demonstrations have been accompanied by other activities aimed at nurturing good relations between the two communities. On 16 September, an Israeli pianist joined the protesters in Bil'in and

performed a concert in the village which was broadcast on Palestinian radio. The Israeli army again declared the area a closed military zone and stopped several Israeli peace activists on route to Bil'in, though others managed to bypass the army roadblocks.

The Israeli authorities contend that the fence/wall is being built as "a defensive measure, designed to block the passage of terrorists, weapons and explosives into the State of Israel". However, more than 80% of the fence/wall is being built on Palestinian land inside the occupied West Bank and not between the West Bank and Israel.

The route of the fence/wall has been designed so as to encompass a large number of Israeli settlements inside the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which have been built and continue to be expanded in violation of international law. Scores of Israeli settlements in the West Bank are located on Palestinian land which is being cut off from the rest of the West Bank by the fence/wall. While more than 320,000 Israeli settlers, approximately 80% of the settlers who are living illegally in the West Bank, will be living on the western side of the fence/wall and enjoy even more direct territorial contiguity with Israel, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are being cut off from their land by the fence/wall.

In July 2004, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) concluded that the construction of the fence/wall by Israel inside the West Bank violates international law, and called on Israel to stop construction inside the West Bank, to dismantle the sections already built there, and to provide reparation to the Palestinians who have been affected.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Arabic, English or your own language:

- calling on the authorities to put an end to the use of force against non-violent demonstrators in the West Bank village of Bil'in and stop imposing arbitrary closures in and around the village;
- call on the authorities to stop building the fence/ wall in Bil'in and elsewhere inside the West Bank, and to remove the sections already built there, so as to end the unlawful appropriation of Palestinian land and the arbitrary restrictions on the movement of Palestinians in areas affected by the fence/wall.

APPEALS TO:

Ariel Sharon
Prime Minister
Office of the Prime Minister
3 Kaplan Street, P O Box 187
Kiryat Ben-Gurion
Jerusalem 91919
Israel

Fax: + 972 2 561 1033/+ 972 2 566 4838
Email: public@president.gov.il
Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

Menahem Mazuz
Attorney General
Ministry of Justice
29 Salah al-Din Street
Jerusalem 91010
Israel

Fax: + 972 2 627 4481/+ 972 2 628 5438/+ 972 2 530 3367
Salutation: Dear Attorney General

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Israel/Occupied Territories accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 3 November 2005