

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Israel/Occupied Territories: Call for independent investigation into Rafah killings

Amnesty International urges the Israeli authorities to promptly carry out a thorough and independent investigation into the killing of eight Palestinians, four of them children, and the injury of dozens of others by the Israeli army during a demonstration in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah, on 19 May 2004.

Amnesty International delegates were in the vicinity of the demonstration at the time of the incident. They saw Israeli army helicopters hovering over the area where the demonstration was taking place, dropping what appeared to be flares; shortly after they heard several rounds of heavy shelling.

Demonstrators and eyewitnesses claim that the loss of life and injuries were caused by shelling from Israeli army helicopters and tanks stationed nearby. According to Israeli army officials, tanks shelled an empty building in order to deter the demonstrators from proceeding towards Israeli army positions; they also state that Israeli helicopters fired a missile at a nearby open space.

The Israeli shelling hit a built-up area on Sea Street, the main east-west road in Rafah, where the Palestinian demonstrators were walking. An Israeli army aerial photograph published in the Israeli media shows that the building at which the tank shelling was aimed is located in a built-up area on the street where the demonstrators were marching.

Israeli officials have alleged that the demonstrators were led by gunmen. While Amnesty International cannot confirm or deny the presence of armed Palestinians among the demonstrators, the organization's delegates did not see any armed men when they passed the demonstration prior to the attack. In addition, they did not hear any Palestinian fire prior to or following the Israeli army shelling. Furthermore, the footage from television crews who filmed the demonstration prior to, during and after the shelling, reviewed by Amnesty International's delegates, does not show armed individuals in the demonstration.

Based on information available, Amnesty International is concerned that the means and methods used by the Israeli army during a non-violent demonstration in a built-up area, which resulted in the loss of life and injuries to Palestinians, were excessive and violated international law.

In light of a pattern of inadequate investigations or lack of investigations into unlawful killings and excessive use of force by the Israeli security forces resulting in death or injury to Palestinians, it is imperative that a thorough and independent investigation be promptly carried out by the Israeli judicial authorities. The scope, methods and findings of the investigation must be made public and those responsible for human rights violations must be brought to justice.

