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Lebanon/Israel: Urgent need for ceasefire and investigation of war crimes

Amnesty International reiterates its call for an immediate, full and effective ceasefire after civilian death highs. On Friday 5 August, at least 23 Syrian agricultural workers were killed by Israeli forces on a farm in the village of al-Qaa on the Lebanese-Syrian border according to various reports. This was the highest number of fatalities recorded so far in a single incident together with the attack on a building in Qana on 30 July. Over the past four days, rockets fired by Hizbullah from southern Lebanon at Israel are also said to have killed at least 14 civilians. These kinds of attacks by both sides have become part of an increasingly entrenched pattern which includes war crimes.

Such attacks also make it urgent and imperative that Israel and Lebanon consent to an investigation -- of the pattern of attacks by both Israel and Hizbullah -- by an independent and impartial body like the International Humanitarian Fact-Finding Commission (IHFFC). The Israeli investigation into the killings of civilians in Qana, where at least 28 people sheltering in a building were killed in an Israeli strike, lacked any credibility.

According to an eye-witness who was interviewed by Amnesty International delegates in Lebanon, the Israeli forces launched two air strikes against a farm in al-Qaa on Friday. The workers, most of them Syrian Kurds and who included at least five women, packed and processed fruits for export on the farm. The witness said he saw the first explosion from the roof of his church compound. As he prepared to go and help, another explosion followed five to seven minutes later. He said he saw 22 bodies being pulled out.

An Israeli army spokesperson said the attack was directed at the suspected transfer of weapons by Hizbullah from Syria. The information gathered from Amnesty International delegates from eye witnesses and footage of the scene show no evidence supporting the Israeli army allegations. The attack appears to have been indiscriminate or disproportionate and as such a war crime.

Since Friday, Israeli forces have again pounded civilian infrastructure in Lebanon, cutting off one of the last remaining vital routes for international humanitarian aid. At least 45 civilians are reported to have died in the attacks, including those killed in al-Qaa raid. Israel warned residents in the southern Lebanese city of Sidon to evacuate the city ahead of planned air strikes on Hizbullah targets by the Israeli army. The Israeli army dropped leaflets around the city warning all residents to leave.

Repeated Israeli strikes against the civilian infrastructure have forcibly displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians, and are threatening to displace other tens of thousands in Sidon who have been forcibly displaced from villages in the region. This new call for evacuation cannot mean that Sidon should be regarded by Israeli forces as a "free-fire" zone or a military objective. Along with the pattern of warnings

to civilians in the south Israeli forces are making it difficult for such civilians to leave by destroying roads and bridges and targeting convoys. Such actions result in the spreading of panic and terror rather than increasing the protection of civilians.

Hizbullah officials have described the group's rocket attacks against Israel as reprisals for Israeli attacks on civilians. Amnesty International considers these attacks unlawful, and constituting direct attacks on civilians and as such war crimes.

Amnesty International urges the United Nations Security Council which is currently debating a draft resolution on the crisis to call for an immediate, full and effective ceasefire to protect civilians in Lebanon and Israel. The Council must also demand that the parties to the conflict immediately take all measures necessary to allow delivery of humanitarian aid to persons affected by the hostilities. As it deliberates on its next steps, the Council should address the failure of the parties to the conflict to respect their obligations under international law and how to establish accountability for that failure.