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Israel/Occupied Territories: Israel must halt attacks on Gaza residential areas - children killed

Amnesty International is calling on the Israeli army to end immediately its air bombardments and shelling of civilian residential areas in the Gaza Strip. At least two Palestinian children have been killed and tens of other civilian bystanders injured in recent days during the course of such attacks; at least 15 other Palestinians, most of them reported to be members of armed groups, were killed.

Hadeel Ghaban, a seven-year-old girl, was killed on 10 April 2006 when Israeli troops fired artillery shells at her home in the northern Gaza Strip town of Beit Lahia. The child's mother and a dozen of her siblings and other relatives, including several children, were injured in the attack. Three days earlier, a five-year-old boy, Bilal Abu al-'Einein, was killed in an Israeli air strike as he was standing near a car with his 14-year-old brother and their father. The boys' father and three other men were also killed and several other bystanders, including two children, were injured in the attack. The four men who were killed in the attack were reported to be members of a Palestinian armed group but not to have been involved in any armed confrontation at the time when they were targeted by the air strike.

Commenting on this 7 April attack, the Israeli army stated: "In a security forces activity tonight in the southern Gaza Strip, the IDF carried out an aerial attack against a vehicle carrying terrorists as it was leaving a training camp of the Popular Resistance Committees organization. Terrorists were using the camp for terror training and weapons training", (<http://www1.idf.il/DOVER/site/mainpage.asp?sl=EN&id=7&clr=1&docid=51540.EN>). The statement failed to mention the killing of the five-year-old child.

Israeli army and Defense Ministry sources were reported by the Israeli media to have expressed regret over the killing of Hadeel Ghaban but to have vowed to continue intensive attacks on the Gaza Strip. On 11 April, Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz was reported to have stated that "As long as it's not quiet here [in Israel], it won't be quiet there [in Gaza.]" (<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/705055.html>)

Expressions of regret by Israeli army and government officials for the killings of Palestinian children and other bystanders ring hollow as repeated attacks by Israeli troops on densely populated residential areas continue to claim the lives of Palestinians, including children, in situations where they pose no threats to the lives of Israelis.

Another example is the killing of three Palestinian children, 14-year-old Ahmed al-Sweifi and Ra'ed and Mahmud al-Batash, aged 11 and 17, in an Israeli air strike in the afternoon of 6 March in Gaza City. The children were walking in the street when an Israeli missile hit a passing car in which two members of a Palestinian armed group were travelling, killing the two passengers of the car and the three children.

More than 15 Palestinian children have been killed and dozens have been injured in Israeli army attacks throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip since the beginning of this year. They were among some 75 Palestinians killed by Israeli troops in the past three months, during which scores of Palestinians, including children, have been injured. Many of those killed were members of Palestinian armed groups who were targeted while they were not involved in armed attacks or confrontations.

The Israeli authorities have long pursued a policy of extrajudicial executions as a substitute for arrest and prosecution of Palestinians involved in attacks against Israelis. Hundreds of bystanders have been killed in such attacks, in addition to the targets of the attacks. Since Israel redeployed its troops from inside the Gaza Strip in September 2005, Israeli forces have stepped up air strikes and artillery attacks against different areas of the Gaza Strip. The Israeli authorities contend that such attacks are in response to frequent mortar and rocket attacks by Palestinian armed groups launched from the Gaza Strip against Israeli towns and villages near the Gaza Strip. Although they have rarely caused Israeli fatalities or casualties, these Palestinian attacks are unlawful and should stop immediately.

Israeli forces, for their part, must put an immediate end to the frequent, disproportionate and excessive use of force against Palestinian. Such attacks continue to cause death and injury to Palestinian children and other bystanders, and constitute violations of international law.