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Public Statement

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Israel/Occupied Territories: Call for international investigation of Gaza strikes

Amnesty International today called for the establishment of an international investigation to examine the circumstances in which scores of Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip in recent months.

The growing number of victims and the unwillingness of the Israeli authorities to ensure that thorough, independent and impartial investigations are carried out into the actions of their armed forces make the need for an international inquiry all the more urgent.

The killing of seven members of the Ghalia family on 9 June on a beach in the North of the Gaza Strip (<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE150492006>) is only one example of Israel's unwillingness to conduct a full and impartial inquiry to establish the truth. In spite of a growing body of evidence indicating that the victims were killed by Israeli army shelling, the authorities continue to deny all responsibility and have failed to take the necessary measures to adequately investigate the killings.

The internal inquiries the Israeli army says it has carried out in this and other cases that attracted international media attention fail to meet even the most basic requirements of an independent and impartial investigation. Such procedures, in which the Israeli army effectively investigates itself, have tended to exculpate Israeli soldiers and seem to have been aimed more at fending off international criticism than at establishing the truth. Most killings of unarmed Palestinians, including children, are not even mentioned -- let alone investigated -- by the Israeli authorities (also see: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE150312006>).

Since the beginning of this year Israeli forces have killed some 150 Palestinians -- many of them unarmed -- including more than 25 children. About half of the victims were killed in the Gaza Strip. To date none of these cases have been adequately investigated.

Since the end of March 2006, the Israeli army has launched close to 6,000 artillery shells and more than 80 air strikes against densely populated areas in the Gaza Strip. Such disproportionate attacks have killed dozens of Palestinians, including several women and children; many more have been injured. Only yesterday, three Palestinian children, aged 5, 6 and 16, were killed when an Israeli aircraft fired a missile into a densely populated area of the Gaza Strip -- apparently in an attempt to extrajudicially execute two members of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a Palestinian armed group. Many other Palestinians, including children, were injured in the attack.

In the same period Palestinian armed groups have launched hundreds of 'qassam' rockets at Israel,

injuring several Israelis. Most of these rockets have fallen in open spaces, without causing Israeli casualties, but eight Israelis were killed in such attacks in previous years.

Both sides claim that their respective attacks are in response to attacks by the other side, in disregard of the prohibition under international law against reprisal, disproportionate and indiscriminate attacks that endanger civilian lives.

The international community should address this escalating situation and do so according to the principles of international law, which require that killings of civilians and other deaths that occur in disputed circumstances be independently, impartially and thoroughly investigated.

Amnesty International is calling on the United Nations to assemble and deploy a team of authoritative international experts to Israel and the Occupied Territories, with a mandate to carry out an independent and thorough investigation into the growing number of killings of Palestinians by Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip, as well as into the launching of 'qassam' rockets by Palestinian armed groups from Gaza into the South of Israel.

Such an investigation should be adequately resourced. It should be conducted by impartial investigators with the necessary expertise in the conduct of criminal and forensic investigations, and should include experts in the field of forensics, ballistics, human rights and humanitarian law. All parties -- Israelis and Palestinians -- should agree to cooperate fully and grant the experts unimpeded access to people, places and documents. The findings of such investigation should be made public as soon as possible and should be accompanied by concrete recommendations for measures to be taken by the concerned parties to spare civilian lives.