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Israel/Occupied Territories: Hostage-taking and wanton destruction must cease

As confirmation was received of the abduction by Palestinian armed groups of a second Israeli, Amnesty International reiterated its call on the armed groups who are holding Israeli hostages not to harm them and to promptly release them. The organization also called on Israel to put an end to the wanton destruction and collective punishment being carried out by Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip.

The Nasser Salah al-Din Brigades, the armed wing of the Popular Resistance Committee (PRC), today confirmed holding 18-year-old Eliyahu Asheri, a resident of the Israeli settlement of Itamar in the occupied West Bank, whom they reportedly abducted on 25 June. The group threatened to kill Asheri if Israeli forces do not end their incursion into the Gaza Strip.

The same armed group has also claimed responsibility jointly with Hamas' armed wing, Iz al-Din al-Qassam, and the Army of Islam, a little known group believed to be a breakaway faction of the PRC, for the abduction of an Israeli soldier, 19-year-old Corporal Gilad Shalit, on 25 June. The three armed groups are demanding the release of Palestinian women and children detained in Israeli jails in exchange for information about Corporal Shalit.

The holding of hostages, either civilians or armed forces' members, violates the fundamental rights to life, physical and mental integrity and liberty, and is expressly prohibited by international law, which prohibits threatening to harm or to continue holding a detained person in order to compel a third party to do or abstain from doing something as a condition for their release.

Amnesty International calls on the Palestinian armed groups who are holding these two Israeli hostages to abide by their international legal obligation to respect the principles of international humanitarian law, notably Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, which reflects customary international law, and which prohibits the taking of hostages, murder and cruel treatment and torture.

The organization urges the Palestinian armed groups holding these two hostages to release them, to treat them humanely and not to subject them to threats or cruel treatment or torture, and to cease taking and holding hostages.

The Hamas-led Palestinian Authority (PA), PA President Mahmoud Abbas, the political leadership of Hamas and any other parties who exercise command or influence over the armed groups holding these two hostages should make all possible efforts to secure their prompt release and to ensure that their fundamental rights to life, physical and mental integrity and liberty are respected.

Amnesty International is also increasingly concerned by the excessive use of force and wanton destruction of civilian property and infrastructure by Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip. Since 27 June, when Israel began Operation Summer Rain, which it says is aimed at releasing Gilad Shalit, the Israeli army has deployed large numbers of troops in the South of the Gaza Strip and carried out large-scale wanton destruction. This includes the bombardment and destruction of three bridges and electricity networks across the Gaza Strip. These measures have left half the population of Gaza without electricity and have reportedly also adversely affected the supply of water.

In recent days the Israeli authorities have also closed the Rafah crossing into Egypt, the only point of entry/exit for the 1.5 million of Palestinians who live in the Gaza Strip. Several hundred Palestinians who were returning from abroad have been stranded on the Egyptian side of the Rafah crossing for up to a week and are prevented from returning to their homes. Those wishing to leave the Gaza Strip are likewise prevented from leaving.

The wanton destruction of civilian infrastructure and property and the disproportionate restrictions imposed on civilians by Israeli forces amount to collective punishment on the entire population of the Gaza Strip, a violation of Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits punishing protected persons for offences they have not committed.

Amnesty International reiterates its call on the Israeli authorities and army to put an end to the excessive and disproportionate use of force against densely populated residential areas and infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, including frequent artillery shelling and air strikes which endanger the lives of Palestinian residents.

Since the beginning of this year Israeli forces have killed some 150 Palestinians, including some 25 children, and Palestinian armed groups have killed close to 20 Israelis, including two children.