

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Israel/Occupied Territories: Civilian population at risk in Gaza

Amnesty International today urged the Israeli government to immediately cease attacks against Palestinian civilians and civilian property and infrastructure, and to take action to address the growing humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip.

The organization condemned attacks such as those carried out by Israeli forces on the night of 11-12 July 2006, when an entire family -- Nabil and Salwa Abu Salmiya and their seven children aged between seven and 17 -- were killed when the Israeli Air Force targeted their home in a densely populated residential district in Jabaliya, north of Gaza City. More than 30 other residents were injured in the attack.

Israeli officials stated that the air strike had targeted Muhammad Deif, a leader of Hamas's armed wing, who was reported to have been in the building at the time and to have been injured in the attack. However, the Israeli government and military officials who ordered and carried out the air attack on the house at about 02:30 am must have known that Nabil Abu Salmiya, a university lecturer and a Hamas member, and his wife and children, would be present at their home and that they and residents of neighbouring houses would be killed and injured.

Such attacks against civilians are prohibited by international law and Amnesty International called for them to cease immediately.

In recent weeks dozens of Palestinians women, children and other bystanders have been killed and hundreds have been injured by Israeli forces in air strikes and artillery shelling -- including in their homes.

In addition to the nine members of the Abu Salmiya family, some 15 other Palestinians were killed in the past two days, bringing the number of Palestinians killed by Israeli forces this year to some 240. The figure includes scores of members of Palestinian armed groups killed in armed clashes with Israeli troops as well as many uninvolved bystanders, including dozens of children. In the same period, some 20 Israelis, most of them civilians, have been killed by Palestinian armed groups.

Amidst the growing tension following the abduction of an Israeli soldier by armed Palestinians two weeks ago, a deepening humanitarian crisis is unfolding in the Gaza Strip, with increasingly serious consequences for the 1.5 million Palestinians who live there.

The continued closure of the Rafah crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt prevents any travel for the entire population of Gaza. Hundreds of Palestinians who were abroad when the border was closed have been stranded on the Egyptian side of the border for days, unable to return home to Gaza.

Medicine, food and fuel shortages are worsening as a result of repeated and prolonged closures by Israel

of the Karni checkpoint, through which goods must pass to enter the Gaza Strip. Since the destruction of Gaza's power station and water mains by Israeli forces two weeks ago, most Palestinian inhabitants remain without electricity and water most of the time and the situation is made worse by the shortage of fuel needed to power back-up generators and water pumps.

The consequences are particularly serious for the health and sanitation sectors -- especially at this hottest time of the year, when electricity and water supplies are crucial for refrigerating and preserving food and medicines.

Amnesty International said that Israel should promptly lift the closures and the arbitrary restrictions imposed on both the Rafah and Karni crossings, and allow the passage of persons and goods in and out of the Gaza Strip. It should also repair the electricity power station, water mains, bridges and other infrastructure destroyed by its forces.

Palestinian armed groups for their part must put an end to the launching "qassam" rockets or other projectiles into Israel.