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Israel/OT: Failure to investigate deaths cheapens life

Amnesty International is deeply concerned about the failure of Israel to investigate as a matter of policy killings of Palestinians by Israeli forces over the past three weeks. The organization is also concerned that Palestinian authorities are not carrying out proper investigations into killings that have taken place in the areas under their jurisdiction.

"Human life is being cheapened by a mindset which seems to regard the killing of more than 130 Palestinians, including nearly 40 children, and the killing of two detained Israeli soldiers as an unavoidable and acceptable consequence of the current crisis", said Claudio Cordone, the leader of an Amnesty International delegation visiting Israel and the Occupied Territories this week.

"Unlawful killings from excessive use of lethal force have been the result of the Israeli use of military methods to respond to riots and demonstrations since 29 September 2000. The current policy of not investigating such deaths should be ended".

"The current lack of investigations by either side makes it virtually impossible to hold anyone accountable for killings resulting from violations of human rights standards" said Claudio Cordone, " and can only contribute to the spreading of misinformation. This situation makes it all the more necessary that a proper international, independent investigative team of experts is established as soon as possible and allowed to operate effectively, in line with international standards for such investigations."

The Head of the International Law Department of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) told Amnesty International delegates on 24 October 2000 that the situation has moved beyond law enforcement and is now close to one of armed conflict. Palestinian deaths in the Occupied Territories were not being investigated as a matter of policy (although investigations are being carried out in two cases as an exception) in line with the IDF investigation policy regarding military engagements.

On 21 October 2000 the Israeli Government ordered a Commission of Inquiry into the "clashes a number of weeks ago with security forces in which Israeli citizens, Arabs and Jews, were involved". However, this commission, of five members, is not a judicial commission of inquiry ordered under the Law on Commissions of Inquiry, but an administrative inquiry, without key powers such as the authority to compel witnesses to testify. It will report its findings to the Prime Minister.

"We are calling on the Israeli Government to set up a commission under the Law on Commissions of Inquiry and to ensure that this adheres to international standards for thorough, effective and independent investigations. Anyone found responsible for human rights abuses should be brought to justice," Amnesty International said. "Its findings should be made available without delay to the international commission of inquiry now being established."

Amnesty International delegates have also been told by senior Palestinian police officers in Ramallah that the Palestinian Authority is also not conducting investigations into killings of Palestinians by Israeli forces, although they forwarded material on two killings to the Israeli authorities, so far without progress. With regard to the killings of two Israeli soldiers by a Palestinian crowd while detained in a Palestinian police station in al-Bireh, the Palestinian police told Amnesty

International that a special committee to investigate such killings is due to be established, but this has not happened to date.

"The Palestinian Authority should investigate all killings which have taken place in the territory under their jurisdiction. The investigation should be in line with international standards. Anyone found responsible for human rights abuses should be brought to justice."

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