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Israel/Lebanon: Amnesty International calls for the release of all hostages

Amnesty International called today for the release of all those held hostage by the Israeli Government and by the Lebanese group Hizbullah.

"The use of people as hostages is prohibited in international human rights and humanitarian law," the organization said. "All those held hostage should be released immediately and unconditionally."

The 7 October marked the first anniversary of the capture of three Israeli soldiers, Binyamin Avraham, Omar Su'ad and Adi Avitan by Hizbullah. Hizbullah played the leading role in the armed resistance to Israeli occupation in south Lebanon and its armed forces still operate in the area. The three soldiers were seized while on a military patrol in the Sheb'a farms area on the borders of Lebanon and the Syrian Golan heights occupied by Israel. A week later an Israeli reserve colonel, Elhanan Tenenboim, was abducted, apparently in Europe.

In the year since their abduction, none of the four have had access to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) nor are they known to have sent or received any messages from their families.

"Access to the ICRC is a fundamental right of all those detained in armed conflict," said Amnesty International. "We deplore this detention in secret without any access or news."

The four Israelis are believed to be held as "bargaining chips" to be exchanged for Lebanese nationals held as hostages in Israel. Two Lebanese, Shaikh 'Abd al-Karim 'Ubayd and Mustafa al-Dirani, have been held for years in Israel in secret detention with access only to their

lawyer. Hizbullah have also reportedly demanded the release of 16 other Lebanese involved in armed attacks against Israeli military or civilians who are serving sentences of up to 542 years imposed by Israeli military courts.

Shaikh 'Abd al-Karim al-'Ubayd was abducted in Jibshit in South Lebanon in July 1989. He has now been held in Israel for 12 years without charge or trial. After more than 10 years without access, the ICRC was able to see him for only a short period but since January 2001 it has no access. Mustafa al-Dirani, a leader of a Lebanese armed group, who had been responsible for the detention of "disappeared" Israeli navigator, Ron Arad, until 1989, was kidnapped and taken to Israel in May 1994 from his village in Qasarnaba in Lebanon. He was tortured by beatings and degrading treatment after his arrest and has never been charged or tried or allowed access to the ICRC. Both are held under administrative detention orders which are indefinitely renewable.

On 23 August 2001, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that the ICRC should be allowed to have access to the two, but two days later, in response to a petition by the families of Israeli hostages, it issued an order preventing the visit. In 2000 the Supreme Court had ordered the release of 13 other Lebanese held as "bargaining chips," but had allowed the detention of Shaikh 'Abd al-Karim 'Ubayd and Mustafa al-Dirani to continue.

"As a High Contracting Party to the Geneva Conventions, Israel has accepted solemn obligations it is failing to keep," said Amnesty International. "Not only is the holding of hostages prohibited. In addition, the fundamental right of prisoners taken in conflict to access to the ICRC should never be denied."

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