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Public Statement

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Israel/OPT: Civilians in the line of fire in Gaza and Sderot

Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups must cease reckless air strikes and indiscriminate rocket attacks which have been killing civilians and spreading fear in the Gaza Strip and in southern Israel.

In the past two weeks some 50 Palestinians have been killed and some 200 injured in the Gaza Strip by Israeli air strikes and other attacks. In addition, two Israeli civilians have been killed and more than 20 injured in the southern Israeli town of Sderot by so-called "qassam" rockets launched from the Gaza Strip by Palestinian armed groups.

As has often been the case in the past, unarmed civilian bystanders have borne the brunt of this latest spate of attacks and counter-attacks.

In Israel, a 32-year-old woman, Shirel Friedman, was killed on the evening of 21 May 2007 when a rocket struck a car in the parking lot of a shopping centre in Sderot. A few days later, on the morning of 27 May, 36-year-old Oshri Oz was killed by a rocket that landed near his car as he was driving in Sderot.

These crude home-made rockets are indiscriminate weapons, as they are unguided and cannot be aimed at specific targets. The victims have invariably been civilians. In the past two weeks more than 250 rockets have been fired into southern Israel by Palestinian armed groups, mostly by Hamas' armed wing. Houses and other properties have also been destroyed or damaged in such attacks.

In the Gaza Strip, some 20 unarmed civilian bystanders, including several children, were among those killed in the past two weeks in Israeli air strikes that mostly targeted Hamas militants.

Seven members of the al-Haya family, including two children, were killed on the evening of 20 May 2007 by an Israeli air strike on a meeting hall belonging to the al-Haya family and adjacent to their house in Gaza City. One of those killed was a Hamas activist but he was not believed to be the target of the air strike. The owner of the house, a Hamas member of the Palestinian parliament, was not at home at the time. The previous morning, an Israeli missile strike killed three shepherds, two of them children in a field in Gaza City. Maher Hamad Abu Hasheesh and Mohammed and Samir 'Abdul Fattah Abu Mote'e were aged 15, 16 and 19, respectively,

Israeli forces frequently launch air strikes and artillery attacks against targets in the Gaza Strip. According to the Israeli authorities the attacks aim to kill members of armed groups involved in firing rockets into Israel and to assassinate militants while they are in their homes or traveling by car, as well as to destroy buildings used by armed groups to manufacture or store weapons. However such attacks often kill and injure large numbers of uninvolved bystanders and cause large-scale destruction of houses and public properties especially when they target locations in refugee camps and densely populated residential.

Israeli and Hamas officials seek to justify the actions of their side as being in response to attacks by the other side. In the meantime residents of Gaza and Sderot who have no part in the conflict live in fear of the next strike and have no means of protecting themselves and their loved ones.

Palestinian armed groups carry out indiscriminate attacks knowing that any victims of the "qassam" rockets are invariably Israeli civilians, while Israeli officials claim that every effort is made to spare Palestinian bystanders when they launch attacks against targets in Gaza, but their conduct indicates otherwise. Although they are well aware that air strikes and artillery attacks in refugee camps and densely populated residential neighbourhoods are almost certain to harm bystanders - as proven by thousands of such cases in recent years, such practices continue. Their failure to change their forces' practices and to put in place the necessary safeguards to prevent such frequent killings, injuries and wanton destruction indicates a distinct disregard for the fundamental rights of the Palestinian population.

The ongoing wave of Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip comes in the wake of the most intense inter-factional armed clashes between rival Palestinian security forces and armed groups which left some 50 Palestinians dead and some 200 injured between 13 and 20 May 2007. Most of the casualties were gunmen but also included several uninvolved bystanders who were caught in the armed confrontations as the two sides battled each others in the streets and from buildings in residential neighbourhoods, causing fear and panic for local residents.

The actions of both sides violate fundamental principles of international law, notably the right to life, and the prohibition on the targeting of civilians. Amnesty International calls:

- o on all parties to put an immediate end to attacks which target or cause disproportionate harm to civilians;
- o on Israel to investigate each case of civilians killed or harmed as a results of attacks by Israeli forces and bring to justice anyone responsible for reckless or disproportionate use of force;
- o on the Palestinian Authority (PA) to take steps to prevent rocket or other attacks by Palestinian armed groups against Israeli civilians and to bring to justice those responsible for such attacks;
- o on the PA to ensure that all killings of civilians, abductions and any other attacks against civilians - be they Palestinians, Israelis or nationals of other countries - are investigated and that those responsible are brought to justice.