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Lebanon/Israel: 1.8 million asked to write to Israeli government demanding safe passage for trapped civilians

Amnesty International has launched an "Urgent Action" to its 1.8 million members around the world calling on them to write to the Israeli Minister of Defence, Amir Peretz, asking him to take urgent steps to ensure safe passage for civilians in the south of Lebanon.

Israeli bombardment of roads, bridges, telecommunication transmitters, electricity networks and fuel depots throughout southern Lebanon has forced tens of thousand of civilians to flee their homes. But thousands of others who were unable to leave are now trapped in the area.

"The plight of civilians in the south of Lebanon is at crisis point. Evacuation of civilians who wish to leave must happen immediately, and emergency supplies and aid needs to reach villages in Southern Lebanon urgently," said Kate Gilmore, Amnesty International's Executive Deputy Secretary General.

"The Israeli authorities must allow immediate and unimpeded humanitarian access, as well as safe passage out of Southern Lebanon. It is absolutely shameful that humanitarian convoys trying to deliver badly needed aid cannot gain safe access."

For at least a week, neither the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), nor any other humanitarian or relief organization, has been able to reach the villages under Israeli siege. United Nations' top humanitarian official Jan Egeland on Thursday criticised Israel and Hizbullah for hindering access to 120,000 people still in South Lebanon, calling it a "disgrace".

Amnesty International delegates who visited a number of villages earlier this week reported that in at least two of them, Aitatoun and Bint Jbail, more than 200 people remain trapped, including women, children, elderly and disabled people. At least one of those trapped is a pregnant woman.

The Amnesty International delegates described the unbearable stench of rotting corpses that pervades the villages as the bodies of people killed in their homes remain under the rubble, roaming dogs often indicating where bodies are buried.

"The dire humanitarian situation is not exclusive to the villages that our delegates were able to visit, the situation of despair of those who remain trapped by the conflict is likely to be replicated in villages all over the south of Lebanon," said Kate Gilmore.

"Israel's repeated calls for residents to evacuate villages has led to massive internal displacement. The mere issuing of warnings does not excuse disrespect for the rules of war," Kate Gilmore cautioned.

Amnesty International called on Israel to respect the distinction, that is protected under law, between civilian and military objects. It must put an end to the direct, disproportionate and indiscriminate targeting of civilian objects, such as residential buildings and medical facilities.

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