

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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First Special Session of the UN Human Rights Council: Situation of human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

(Geneva) -- As the UN Human Rights Council (the Council) convenes in its first ever Special Session to consider the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Amnesty International today reiterated its call on the UN to assemble and deploy a team of authoritative international experts to Israel and the Occupied Territories, with a mandate to carry out an independent and thorough investigation into the deteriorating human rights situation in the Gaza Strip (see <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE150542006>). Such experts should investigate the growing number of killings of Palestinians by Israeli forces and the deliberate and disproportionate attacks by Israeli forces against civilian property and infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, as well as the launching of 'qassam' rockets by Palestinian armed groups from the Gaza Strip into nearby areas in Israel.

Such an investigation should be adequately resourced. It should be conducted by impartial investigators with the necessary expertise in conducting criminal and forensic investigations. It should include individuals who are expert in the fields of forensics, ballistics, international human rights and humanitarian law. All parties -- Israeli and Palestinian -- should agree to cooperate fully and grant the experts unimpeded access to people, places and documents.

Amnesty International believes that the gravity of the current situation requires a comprehensive approach whereby all aspects of the current crisis, including the factors contributing to it, are investigated. The aims should be to establish the respective responsibilities of all concerned parties and to identify concrete steps that should be taken by each party in order to ensure the protection of the civilian population and to provide effective and accessible remedies for the abuses the parties have committed.

After a year that saw a marked reduction in the level of killings by both sides, the situation has sharply deteriorated in recent months. Since the beginning of this year Israeli forces have killed some 150 Palestinians -- many of them unarmed -- including more than 25 children. To date none of these cases have been adequately investigated.

In recent months the Israeli army has launched thousands of artillery shells and scores of air strikes against densely populated areas in the Gaza Strip, killing dozens of Palestinians, including several women and children, and injuring many others.

In the same period Palestinian armed groups have launched indiscriminately hundreds of 'qassam' rockets at Israel, injuring several civilians.

Most recently, following the abduction by Palestinian armed groups of an Israeli soldier who continues to be held hostage, Israeli forces have launched repeated and deliberate air strikes against electricity and water supply systems, roads and other civilian infrastructure, educational and other public institutions and private property in the Gaza Strip. The destruction is having serious humanitarian consequences for the Palestinian population, whose situation had already worsened due to the impact of the sanctions imposed

after Hamas won a majority in January's Palestinian elections.

Both sides claim that their respective attacks are in response to attacks by the other side, disregarding the prohibition under international law of reprisals, the deliberate targeting of civilians, and disproportionate and indiscriminate attacks that endanger civilian lives.

As the tension between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and armed groups continues to mount, there is growing concern for the safety of the civilian population. Amnesty International urges the Council to address the situation in a comprehensive and constructive manner. The Council should formulate concrete proposals to ensure effective protection of the human rights of all -- Palestinians and Israelis -- caught up in the current crisis.

Under General Assembly resolution 60/251, the Human Rights Council has a clear and unambiguous mandate to address individual human rights situations, including gross and systematic violations, and to respond promptly to human rights emergencies. The situation now before the Council clearly fits these criteria.

Amnesty International calls on all members of the Council to rise to the challenge by taking concrete action so as to make a real difference to those people caught in the current crisis. The Council should avoid perpetuating the situation that prevailed year after year in the Commission on Human Rights, where the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories was among the most talked about but least acted on. Amnesty International considers that the deployment of international experts to investigate the deteriorating human rights situation in the Gaza strip would be an important concrete step.