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Israel/OT/PA: Only justice can end human rights crisis, say Amnesty International delegates

Amnesty International delegates who have been visiting Israel and the Occupied Territories said that only justice and a commitment to uphold human rights for all can end a crisis which is spiralling out of control.

"We saw both populations, Palestinians and Jews, living in fear. Every Palestinian in the Occupied Territories is affected in a cycle of repression which is bringing people to despair. Israelis are living in constant fear of suicide bombs and armed attacks which have deliberately targeted civilians, killing and wounding people in streets, shops and bars. Trampling on people's human rights cannot be justified under any circumstances, not in the name of security and not in the name of freedom," Amnesty International said.

The delegates, who included a military adviser, said that the Israeli use of weapons that cause massive destruction of property, laser-guided bombs dropped by F-16 aircraft and Apache helicopter-launched Air to Ground Hellfire missiles, have made Palestinians in towns constantly watch the sky in fear. Houses and infrastructure have been shelled and demolished without regard for the rules of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which not only prohibits collective punishments but also the destruction of property except when "absolutely necessary" for military operations.

Delegates condemned the use of tank shells containing flechettes in the Gaza Strip. "Each shell may contain up to 5,000 arrows the size of nails, each one capable of killing. "They are entirely inappropriate for use in one of the most densely populated areas in the world", said delegates.

"Areas of Palestinian homes which we had visited several times over the past year were now razed to the ground for alleged security reasons but apparently as collective punishment", said delegates. "It is unacceptable that without warning or legality tanks and bulldozers demolish the homes of hundreds of families, including thousands of children", the organization said.

Such demolitions are particularly devastating in a context in which up to 48% of the population are now out of work and relying on UN handouts. They have become, together with closures and checkpoints, part of a daily diet of harassment and humiliation for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories.

Amnesty International has frequently condemned house demolitions and has also stated that the failure to investigate unlawful killings was allowing frightened or reckless soldiers to carry out such killings with impunity.

Now many Israeli soldiers, conscripts and reservists are telling their government that they do not want to carry out such violations of human rights, stating that rules of engagement and orders from commanding officers have led to killings of Palestinians when no lives were in danger.

"One soldier told us that rules of engagement in the town where he was serving ordered a soldier to kill someone about to light a Molotov cocktail even when the soldier was in a heavily protected pillbox and in no danger," said delegates. More than 150 reservists have signed a statement saying that they will no longer serve in the Occupied Territories "to expel, starve and humiliate an entire people".

"The IDF, whose mission statement emphasises "the supreme value of human life", is accepting or even ordering unpardonable acts. In Artas village near Bethlehem eyewitnesses told us how on 29 January soldiers had left a wounded man, Ahmad Ilyas 'Aysh, in mud and rain for more than an hour during the night while they called for his brother to give himself up." Nobody was allowed to come near to help him.

"Wilful killings, inhuman treatment and unjustified demolitions of homes are grave breaches of the Fourth Geneva Convention," said delegates.

During their visit to Jenin, which had been cut off from the outside world for 27 days in December 2001 following suicide bombings which killed more than 27 civilians in Israeli towns, delegates visited victims of attacks by Israeli soldiers who had randomly sprayed schools and residential areas with shells and bullets. During the closures patients from surrounding villages were unable to get to hospital in Jenin; at least two pregnant women who were turned back lost their new-born babies. Even now, barriers and the blocking of many roads to Palestinians means that a journey of 20 kilometres can take three hours along tortuous, unpaved roads. "Freedom of movement is a right which is constantly violated for all Palestinians in Israel's Occupied Territories," said delegates.

Delegates also condemned Palestinian armed attacks on Israeli civilians. The delegation visited a West Bank settlement to talk to a victim of a drive by shooting in August 2001, Stephen Bloomberg. "His wife, a nurse, has been killed, he is paralysed, one daughter is in a wheelchair," said the delegates. "The deliberate targeting of civilians can never be justified," said Amnesty International. Amnesty International delegations, including this one, have frequently visited leaders of Palestinian armed groups to condemn the targeting of civilians and urge an end to these abuses.

The Palestinian Authority should arrest all those who have planned or carried out armed attacks. But delegates expressed concern that those arrested were frequently not given any access to lawyers or families and appeared to be held outside any legal framework. "Justice for the victims of these groups can only be achieved through respect for human rights, including the right to fair trial," delegates commented.

Amnesty International repeats its call for the international community to act and to send international observers with a strong, transparent and public mandate to monitor the respect of international humanitarian law and human rights to the Occupied Territories.

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