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ISRAEL/OCCUPIED TERRITORIES: International Rights Groups Decry Increased Harassment of Monitors

Amnesty International, Euro-Mediterranean Network for Human Rights (EMNHR), Human Rights Watch (HRW), International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), World Organisation against Torture (OMCT)

(Copenhagen, Geneva, London / New York / Paris 27 May 2003) Amnesty International, the Euro-Mediterranean Network for Human Rights (EMNHR), Human Rights Watch (HRW), the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation against Torture (OMCT) are deeply concerned about the increase of Israeli restrictions against human rights and humanitarian workers.

On May 21, Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Silvan Shalom said that "most human rights offices in the West Bank and Gaza strip provide shelter for Palestinian terrorists."

This comment has no basis in fact and constitutes a further threat to the work of independent human rights organizations and workers in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. "We fear that such unsupported allegations are intended to intimidate local and international human rights defenders, and to prevent them from carrying out their daily work," the organizations said.

Palestinian and Israeli human rights organizations have long suffered crippling restrictions on freedom of movement. Researchers carry out their work under circumstances of considerable personal danger, and many have suffered intimidation and harassment by the Israeli authorities and army while carrying out their work.

"In light of the Minister's comments we fear such intimidation and harassment will further increase. Recently, threats to personal safety and restrictions on the activities of local and international human rights and humanitarian workers and peace activists have sharply increased", said the organizations.

This year alone, the Israeli army has killed a foreign peace activist, Rachel Corrie and gravely injured two others, Tom Hurndall and Brian Avery. A foreign journalist, James Miller, was also shot dead by Israeli soldiers. A military investigation undertaken into Rachel Corrie's killing reportedly found no wrongdoing, although the full findings have not been made public. It is not known whether the other events

have been investigated: certainly, no findings on any of these killings or injuries have been released, and no judicial action taken.

At the same time, international human rights workers and peace activists are increasingly being arrested and threatened with deportation by the Israeli authorities. At least two have been deported in recent weeks, and several others are facing deportation orders. At least six foreign humanitarian workers have been refused entry to Israel, and growing restrictions are imposed on movement and activities of those already present in the country.

Of particular concern is the decision of the Israeli authorities on 9 May to condition entry of foreigners into the Gaza Strip to their signing a "waiver" which seeks to absolve Israel from responsibility for any death or injury caused by Israeli soldiers.

Among other things, the "waiver" states that those entering the Gaza Strip: "accept that the government of the state of Israel and its organs cannot be held responsible for death, injury and/or damage/loss of property which may be incurred as a result of military activity".

The Gaza Strip was subsequently closed and remains inaccessible to foreigners, except diplomats and selected emergency relief workers.

These restrictions on the movement and activities of local and international human rights and humanitarian workers, peace activists, journalists and others are intended to reduce independent scrutiny of the human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

"Such restrictions on independent monitoring of serious human rights violations can only aggravate the current atmosphere of impunity."

The organizations called on Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom and the Israeli authorities to:

- Retract publicly the unfounded allegations made by Minister Shalom on 21 May 2003;
- Put an end to harassment, intimidation, threats, and deliberate attacks on human rights defenders;
- Cease arbitrarily arresting human rights defenders and foreign nationals. Those arrested should be charged with a recognized criminal offence, based on factual and public evidence;
- Abide by the provisions of the Declaration on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders adopted on December 9, 1998 by the UN General Assembly and in particular its Article 1, which states that: "Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international level;"
- Immediately lift the restrictions on access imposed on the Gaza Strip and facilitate development work, humanitarian aid and human rights monitoring by providing full and unrestricted access to all; and
- Conform with international human rights and humanitarian law in all actions and ensure that all killings and other violations are thoroughly and independently investigated.

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