

UA 148/07

Fear for safety

PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

Civilian population of the Gaza Strip

Political violence in the Gaza Strip (Palestinian Authority - PA) is escalating, reaching unprecedented levels in recent days, and is putting the civilian population more and more at risk. Some 130 Palestinians have been killed and several hundreds injured in the past month alone in clashes between the security forces and their proxy militias loyal to President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah party or to Prime Minister Isma'il Haniyeh's Hamas party.

Most of the casualties have been gunmen, but scores of unarmed civilian bystanders, including several children, have been killed or injured by Fatah and Hamas gunmen, who have been firing at each other in the streets and from the rooftops of buildings in residential areas of Gaza City and elsewhere in the Gaza Strip.

Gunmen from both sides have shown utter disregard for fundamental human rights principles. On 13 June unidentified gunmen fired on unarmed demonstrators, who were calling for an end to the armed clashes, in Gaza City and Khan Younes, in the south of the Gaza Strip, injuring several protesters. Also on the same day two Palestinian employees of the United Nation Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA), the main relief agency in the Gaza Strip were killed and two others were injured in the crossfire of Fatah-Hamas clashes.

Armed groups from both sides have carried out execution-style unlawful killings of captured rivals, and have abducted scores of members of rival groups and held them hostage, to be exchanged for friends and relatives held by their rivals.

Since 11 June gunmen have been mounting attacks in and around hospitals, directly targeting and launching attacks from hospital buildings. On 12 June Gaza City's Shifa Hospital, the main hospital in the Gaza Strip, was attacked with heavy weapons, including rocket-propelled grenades and home-made mortars, putting patients and staff in danger, impeding the work of the medical staff and hindering access to healthcare for those in need. UN agencies have expressed concern that the fighting is hampering the UN's ability to deliver emergency services, notably food and healthcare, and that gunmen have fought inside two UNRWA facilities. Such attacks constitute a gross violation of international law, which prohibits the targeting of civilians and indiscriminate attacks, and affords special protection to medical and humanitarian facilities, which must never be targeted or used for attacks or other activities which compromise their neutrality.

Educational institutions have also been damaged as a result of reckless gun battles and indiscriminate attacks, and the escalating violence has prevented many high school students from taking their final exams. All aspects of life in the Gaza Strip have been virtually paralyzed, with terrified residents trapped in their homes but unable to feel safe even there.

In a separate incident, gunmen from the armed wings of Fatah and Islamic Jihad used a "TV" sign to disguise an armoured vehicle which they used to carry out an attack on an Israeli army post on the dividing line between the Gaza Strip and Israel on 10 June. Such actions increase the risk that Israeli forces may attack journalists operating in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, mistaking them for gunmen in disguise.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Tensions between Fatah and Hamas have increased steadily since January 2006, when Hamas won a majority in the parliamentary election, defeating Fatah, the party which had ruled the PA since its establishment more than a decade earlier. Armed confrontations between rival Fatah and Hamas security forces and their proxy militias increased as repeated attempts to form a coalition government of national unity failed. The political tensions have been compounded by increasing levels of poverty and despair among Gaza's 1.5 million inhabitants as a result of the economic sanctions imposed on the Hamas government by Israel and the international community. After a marked increase in violence at the beginning of 2007, Fatah and Hamas formed a government of national unity with other parties and independent figures in March 2007. However Fatah-Hamas rivalries and power struggles have spilled over once again into armed confrontations since mid-May. Ceasefires mediated by Palestinian political figures and by Arab countries have been repeatedly broken within days or hours. Security forces have not only consistently failed to act to stop and prevent attacks and other human rights abuses, but are also themselves responsible directly for committing killings, attacks and other human rights violations.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- calling on both President Abbas and Prime Minister Haniyeh to take concrete steps to end the growing lawlessness and to prevent further killings of civilians;
- urging them to assert control over the security forces and ensure that they uphold the law and respect human rights, including international standards relating to the use of force and treatment of prisoners, and ensure that members of their security forces who abuse human rights or fails to carry out their duty are held to account;

- urging them to end impunity, by establishing effective mechanisms to bring to justice those responsible for human rights abuses, irrespective of their political affiliation;
- calling on them to instruct their security forces that the armed groups who serve as their proxy militias and commit human rights abuses or crimes must be apprehended and brought to justice, irrespective of their political affiliations, in accordance with international human rights law and standards;
- calling on them to put in place a mechanism to ensure independent, impartial and non-partisan oversight of the security forces;
- urging them to ensure that all killings, abductions and other attacks on civilians are investigated and that those responsible are brought to justice;
- pointing out that you are making the same appeals to the other side, and making it clear that Amnesty International does not side with either party.

APPEALS TO:

President Mahmoud Abbas
Office of the President
Ramallah, Palestinian Authority, via Israel
Fax: +972 2 296 3170
+972 2 298 1370
+970 8 282 2365
+970 8 282 2366
+ 970 2 296 3179
Email: rhusseini@president.ps
Salutation: Dear President Abbas

Isma'il Abd al Salam Ahmad Haniyeh
 Hamas leader
Fax: +970 8 282 2159
Email: ihaniyeh@hotmail.com
Salutation: Dear Mister Haniyeh

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of the Palestinian Authority accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 26 July 2007.*****