

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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## **Israel must investigate shooting of protesters in Golan**

Amnesty International today called on the Israeli authorities to launch a full, impartial and independent investigation into the Israeli military's lethal use of live ammunition yesterday against demonstrators in Syria approaching the Israeli border.

Israeli troops opened fire on hundreds of Syrian and Palestinian protesters in the border area near Majdal Shams, a town in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The protests, which also took place near Quneitra, a city in the part of the Golan still administered by Syria, were organized to mark Naksa Day, the anniversary of the start of the June 1967 war, in which Israel occupied Syria's Golan Heights, as well as the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Syria's state news agency, SANA, reported that 23 people – including a child, a woman and a journalist – were killed by the Israeli military on Sunday, and that over 350 people were wounded by bullets and tear gas. Syrian state media identified those killed by name and many of the names were separately reported to Amnesty International by human rights activists in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, who had obtained them from Syrian medical sources.

Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spokespeople have acknowledged that protesters were shot and wounded, but have disputed the Syrian casualty figures as too high. They have alleged that protesters threw rocks and Molotov cocktails, and attempted to damage border fencing, but have not claimed that demonstrators had firearms. They have also alleged that a number of casualties were caused by protesters activating land mines in the area near Quneitra.

Amnesty International spoke to a human rights activist in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights who witnessed the IDF response to protesters at the border near Majdal Shams. With others from the town, he said he observed the events at a distance of around 10 metres from IDF troops. He told Amnesty International that over a 10-hour period, from approximately 11am to 9pm, Israeli soldiers sheltering behind multiple barbed wire fences periodically fired live ammunition at protesters some 60 metres away.

He confirmed IDF statements that troops warned protesters in Arabic before opening fire initially, however, he reported that they did not fire tear gas or sound bombs to disperse the protesters until around dusk. This contradicts IDF claims that all possible non-lethal means were used to disperse the protesters before lethal force was used.

Syrian ambulances evacuated injured protesters to the Mamdouh Abaza Hospital in Quneitra throughout the day, where the hospital director was quoted by SANA as saying that doctors had operated on more than 90 patients during the day. Although IDF spokespeople claimed that Israeli troops aimed at the lower half of protesters' bodies, Syrian health authorities reported that the majority of injuries were to the upper body.

Amnesty International is seriously concerned that Israeli troops used excessive force by firing live ammunition against protesters who were not endangering the lives of Israeli military personnel or others. The fact that this is the second such incident in under a month, after at least 12 protesters demonstrating near Israel's borders were killed by the Israeli military on 15 May, highlights the urgency of independent investigations into both sets of events, in order to help prevent further loss of life and ensure accountability for killings that were unlawful.

**Background**

On 15 May 2011, Israeli troops fired on Palestinian and Arab protesters who demonstrated near Israel's borders with Lebanon, Syria and the northern Gaza Strip, as well as inside the occupied West Bank, killing at least 12 people and injuring hundreds. Palestinian refugees had organized large demonstrations at Israeli borders and checkpoints to commemorate Nakba Day, when they mark the anniversary of their displacement and dispossession in the 1948 war, which made hundreds of thousands of Palestinians refugees in neighbouring states. Amnesty International called for a full, independent and impartial investigation into the IDF response to the protests (see <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE15/025/2011/en>).

Although the IDF has initiated internal investigations into some of the incidents on 15 May, there are no indications that a credible, independent investigation has been launched.

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