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Public Statement

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Israel/Occupied Territories: Israel must end unlawful killings of Palestinians and stop reckless shelling

Amnesty International is calling on Israel to end immediately its reckless shelling and air strikes against the Gaza Strip, which have killed and injured scores of unarmed Palestinians, including several women and children, in recent months.

In the latest such attack on the afternoon of 9 June 2006, seven members of the same Palestinian family were killed and ten of other civilians were injured when Israeli forces fired several artillery shells at a beach in the North of the Gaza Strip. The beach was crowded with Palestinian families enjoying the first week-end of the school holidays.

Ali Issa Ghalia, his wife Raissa and their five children - a one-year-old son and four daughters aged two, four, 15 and 17 - were killed and other members of their family, including two children, were injured when an Israeli shell landed where they were sitting. Some 30 other civilians, including a dozen children, sitting nearby were also injured in the blast.

Amnesty International urges the Israeli authorities to ensure that the investigation they have reportedly launched is thorough and impartial, that the findings are made public, that those responsible for the lethal shelling of unarmed civilians are brought to justice, and that measures are put in place without delay to prevent any recurrence of such killings.

The seven members of the Ghalia family were the most recent among a growing number of victims of increasingly frequent and disproportionate Israeli attacks against the Gaza Strip.

Seven-year-old Hadeel Ghaben was killed when an Israeli artillery shell landed on her house in the northern Gaza Strip town of Beit Lahia on 10 April. Her mother and her eight brothers and sisters, all of them children, and two other children from the neighbourhood were also injured in the attack.

In another attack, on 19 May, a missile fired by Israeli forces at a vehicle travelling on a busy street in Gaza City killed and injured six members of the Aman family. Seven-year-old Muhand, his mother Na'ima and his grandmother Hanan were killed and his four-year-old sister Mariya and his uncle Nahed were left paralysed.

Since the end of March, Israeli forces have fired some 6,000 artillery shells and more than 80 missiles into the Gaza Strip, one of the most densely populated places in the world.

According to Israeli officials the intensive shelling and air strikes are in response to the firing of more than 200 home-made rockets (qassams) into the South of Israel by Palestinian armed groups operating within the Gaza Strip. These rockets, which Palestinian armed groups claim are fired in response to Israeli attacks,

are indiscriminate and endanger civilian life. Although, in practice, such rockets have almost always fallen into open spaces, one rocket fired on 11 June injured three Israeli civilians. Amnesty International reiterates its call on the Palestinian Authority to prevent further such rocket or other attacks by Palestinian armed groups against Israeli civilians.

Since the beginning of 2006 Israeli forces have killed more than 130 Palestinians, many of them unarmed and including more than 20 children. In the same period 16 Israelis, two of them children, have been killed by Palestinian armed groups.

While Israeli officials contend that soldiers only open fire when their lives are at risk and only respond to the source of Palestinian fire, the large number of unarmed Palestinians, including more than 600 children, killed by Israeli forces in the past five and a half years indicates otherwise.

Israeli authorities have expressed regret for some of the killings of Palestinian civilians - usually in cases which attract international media attention - claiming they occurred as a result of mistakes. Yet the Israeli authorities, who are responsible for the conduct of their armed forces, are fully aware that the use of certain weapons and munitions in such situations invariably results in the killing or injuring of bystanders, including children.

Many killings of Palestinians in reckless shootings, tank shelling and air strikes by Israeli forces have been unlawful. They have been carried out by Israeli forces pursuant to government policy, evidenced by the knowledge and approval of government authorities who are fully aware of the consequences of such practices.

Expressions of regret by the Israeli authorities ring hollow in the face of their continued failure to change their forces' practices and to put in place the necessary safeguards to prevent such killings.

Amnesty International reiterates its call on the Israeli authorities to:

- take concrete measures to put an immediate end to reckless, random and disproportionate fire by Israeli forces;

- ensure that all killings of Palestinians by Israeli forces are promptly and independently investigated and that anyone found to be responsible for the unlawful killing of civilians is brought to justice.