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Palestinian Authority: Concerns at growing lawlessness in Gaza

Amnesty International is gravely concerned at the mounting loss of civilian lives, frequent abductions and other abuses, as violent clashes between Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces and armed groups have escalated in recent weeks. With lawlessness becoming more entrenched, civilians are left vulnerable to abuses.

Endemic power struggles and in-fighting between rivalling PA factions and a multitude of armed groups have significantly increased in the lead-up to Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, due later this month. Armed groups linked to the *Fatah* ruling party and to *Hamas* and other factions have been battling each other, competing for recognition of the role each claims to have played in forcing Israel to withdraw from Gaza. PA security forces have so far proved unable or unwilling to control the activities of armed groups and to hold them accountable for their crimes.

In the past two months, some 15 Palestinian civilians, five of them children, have been killed and some 25, including six children, have been injured in armed attacks and clashes between Palestinian armed groups and PA security forces. Some 40 members of the PA security forces and some 25 gunmen have also been injured in the clashes.

At least 11 people, nine of them foreign nationals, have been abducted by Palestinian gunmen seeking to pressure the PA to release their relatives or to make other concessions. All those kidnapped were released unharmed within hours, usually after negotiations and interventions by influential public figures. On 8 August gunmen abducted three staff members of the UN Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA) in Khan Yunis. The three, a British and a Swiss nationals and a Palestinian, were released after a few hours. The gunmen demanded the release of a *Fatah* official who had been detained the previous day by one of the PA security forces. The previous days gunmen had tried to force the release of the detained *Fatah* official by attacking the headquarters of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS) and the office of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Khan Yunis, and attempting to take control of the municipality of the town.

On 29 July, an Australian and a Palestinian staff members of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) were abducted in Gaza City by relatives of a senior member of the PA Military Intelligence, who was abducted a day earlier by one of the many armed groups affiliated to *Fatah*. The two UN workers and the PA intelligence officer were all released unharmed by their respective kidnappers a few hours later.

In a similar incident on 13 July two foreign nationals working on a water project for a development agency were abducted by members of a powerful family demanding the release from prison of six of their relatives detained on criminal charges. It is not known if any of the individuals responsible for these and other abductions have been arrested or if the PA launched an investigation.

On two consecutive days at the beginning of August gunmen launched two bomb attacks against the homes of the Attorney General, Hussein Abu 'Aassi, and the Head of the High Judicial Council, Zuhair al-Sourani. Such attacks on high-ranking PA judicial authorities appear to be intended to discourage judicial investigations and measures against impunity.

As Palestinian armed groups have continued to target Israeli soldiers and settlers in Gaza, they have also at times endangered the Palestinian population. On 2 August two mortars fired by a Palestinian armed group at Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip went astray and hit Palestinian areas. One hit a hospital in Khan Yunis and the second hit a Palestinian house in the northern town of Beit Hanoun, killing a six-year-old child and injuring nine others, including five children.

Attempts by PA security forces to prevent attacks by Palestinian armed groups have often failed and resulted in armed clashes, with lethal consequence. In the week between 14 and 20 July at least five bystanders, four of them children, were killed and several were injured as PA security forces and *Hamas* gunmen exchanged fire in busy streets and in broad daylight. More than 20 security forces members and over a dozen *Hamas* gunmen were also injured in the clashes. Gunmen also booby-trapped or mined certain roads to prevent access to the security forces, gravely endangering the local population.

The PA security forces have been seriously weakened both by the repeated attacks of the Israeli army and by the atmosphere of impunity which has become increasingly entrenched in the past five years. However, the more the situation is allowed to deteriorate, the more difficult it will be to reverse it.

Today it is necessary for the PA to take steps to change the mindset of its security apparatus, and to replace the culture of impunity with a culture of accountability.

The PA must spare no efforts to put an end to the increasing lawlessness and to put in place concrete mechanisms to ensure the protection of the Palestinian civilian population, as well as foreign human right and relief workers and journalists.

Palestinian armed groups for their part, must put an end to attacks against civilians and must not engage in actions which endanger the safety of civilians.