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ISRAEL/LEBANON: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL DEMANDS EFFECTIVE
PROTECTION FOR CIVILIANS, CALLS FOR PROPER INQUIRY INTO KILLINGS BY
ISRAEL

Israeli forces killed civilians in clear breach of the rules of war during the April "Grapes of Wrath" operation against *Hizbullah* in Lebanon -- and the agreements that ended the 17 days of fighting "might amount to little more than paper promises" to prevent such killings in future, Amnesty International said in a new report released today.

More than 150 Lebanese civilians died as a result of Israeli attacks during that operation and unlawful *Hizbullah* attacks against Israeli civilians injured many people during the same period.

"The brutal regularity of civilian casualties in more than 20 years of conflict may contribute to the belief that civilian deaths are an 'inevitable' consequence of this conflict, and create an almost casual acceptance of these deaths," Amnesty International said.

"It takes an event such as the attack on Qana -- the United Nations (UN) compound where more than 100 civilians were killed -- to shatter this complacency."

In the report, based on Amnesty International's field investigations in Israel and Lebanon involving a high-ranking military expert, the organization states that the available information indicates that the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) intentionally attacked the UN compound, despite Israeli claims that the attack was a mistake.

A UN report into the shelling of Qana had concluded last May that it was "unlikely" that the attack had been a mistake, but the report's findings were rejected by the Israeli Government and its United States ally.

"The horrific nature of the events at Qana has only been made worse by the Israeli Government's refusal to own up to its responsibility," Amnesty International said. "Even if it was a mistake -- and Israel has failed to show that it was -- the IDF would still bear responsibility for taking the risk to launch an attack so close to the UN compound, killing so many civilians."

The report also describes in detail two other incidents during Operation "Grapes of Wrath" when Israeli attacks led to the unlawful killing of civilians. An Israeli helicopter deliberately attacked a clearly marked ambulance which was taking civilians out of the war zone village of al-Mansuri, killing six of them, including four children.

“This ambulance was evacuating civilians from a town which the IDF itself had warned civilians to leave,” Amnesty International said. The IDF claims that the vehicle was being used by “a *Hizbullah* terrorist”, but Amnesty International found that it was certainly engaged in legitimate humanitarian activities when it was hit.

In another attack, nine family members, including seven children, were killed while in a house in Upper Nabatiyya which was deliberately destroyed by an Israeli warplane. The IDF claimed that *Hizbullah* combatants had run into the house when it was attacked -- Amnesty International found no evidence of this.

“Such killings must be investigated, those responsible for abuses punished, and the victims compensated. We are calling on the Israeli Government to set up a proper judicial inquiry to do so, and to make recommendations to prevent unlawful killings in the future,” Amnesty International said.

According to the report, *Hizbullah* too is responsible for attacking civilians in clear breach of international law. The armed group told Amnesty International that since 1992 it has launched rocket attacks on population centres in northern Israel in response to Israeli attacks against Lebanese civilians. During “Grapes of Wrath” such attacks by *Hizbullah* took place daily and wounded many Israeli civilians.

The report also criticizes warnings to civilians by Israel, and later by *Hizbullah*, as they appear to have been intended to threaten the civilian populations rather than ensure their safety. Hundreds of thousands of Lebanese fled southern Lebanon and thousands of Israelis fled northern Israel during “Grapes of Wrath”.

In Israel’s case, “rather than enhance civilian protection, the use of such warnings seemed to diminish it because those who would not be threatened into leaving, or could not leave, were assumed by the IDF to be subversives and told that they would be hit,” Amnesty International said.

In the report Amnesty International calls on Israel and *Hizbullah* to publicly commit themselves to fully respect the laws of war and renounce, in particular, deliberate attacks on civilians or indiscriminate attacks in all circumstances.

The report expresses concern that the Monitoring Group set up by the United States, France, Syria, Lebanon and Israel to monitor the latest cease-fire and investigate breaches, including attacks on civilians, has yet to begin functioning because of political disputes among the states involved.

“By its very composition the group lacks the impartiality to properly investigate and follow up on attacks on civilians,” Amnesty International said. “The five states in the group should call on the assistance of the International Fact-Finding Commission in investigating complaints of breaches of the laws of war.” This international body, set up under Protocol 1 Additional to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, has the independence and expertise required to perform this task effectively.

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