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ISRAEL/LEBANON: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONCERNS OVER KILLINGS OF
LEBANESE CIVILIANS REINFORCED AFTER VISITS TO ISRAEL AND LEBANON

The findings of an Amnesty International delegation which returned this week from Lebanon reinforce the organization's concerns that Israeli forces deliberately or indiscriminately killed civilians during Operation "Grapes of Wrath".

More than 150 Lebanese civilians were killed and 350 injured during the operation last month. According to Israeli official sources, 62 Israeli civilians were injured in rocket attacks against northern Israel by Hizbullah.

Amnesty International will be demanding specific clarifications from the Israeli authorities. The organization has put its concerns to the authorities before but they have yet to be fully addressed.

The delegates, who included a military adviser, visited Lebanon between 4 and 19 May 1996 to look into attacks against civilians during last April's Israeli military operation directed against Hizbullah. The delegates visited sites in Qana, Nabatiyyeh, the coastal road and other areas where civilians had been killed. They interviewed eye-witnesses, relatives of victims and officials of local charitable associations. They also met Lebanese government and military authorities and personnel of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

Amnesty International also discussed its concerns with officials of Hizbullah, which has acknowledged to have launched rockets against civilian areas in northern Israel, saying they were in response to Israeli attacks against Lebanese civilians.

This visit to Lebanon follows an earlier Amnesty International visit to Israel in mid-April, during which the organization discussed its concerns about Israeli attacks on civilians in Lebanon in meetings with Israeli political and military officials.

Operation "Grapes of Wrath" lasted between 10 and 26 April. It consisted of large-scale artillery, air and naval attacks against a variety of targets, with the declared aim of hitting Hizbullah as well as forcing Lebanon and Syria to intervene and disarm Hizbullah. Hizbullah has been fighting Israel and its allied militia the South Lebanon Army occupying a strip of Lebanese territory referred to as the "security zone".

Most of the Lebanese civilian casualties took place on 18 April when the Israeli artillery shelled a UNIFIL compound in Qana where some 800 civilians had taken refuge. The operation ended after an "understanding" was brokered by the United States of America and France whereby Israel and Hizbullah engaged themselves not to attack civilians.

During the military confrontation Amnesty International repeatedly appealed to both Israel and Hizbullah to respect fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and not target civilians or carry out indiscriminate attacks.

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