

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

9 October 2000

AI Index MDE 15/035/2000 - News Service Nr. 193

Israel/Occupied Territories/Lebanon: Amnesty International calls for UN investigations

"Since 29 September, Israeli security forces have frequently used excessive force on demonstrators when lives were not in immediate danger," Amnesty International said today.

In preliminary conclusions from Amnesty International's delegation in Israel and the Occupied Territories the human rights organization reiterated its condemnation of the excessive use of force by law enforcement officials.

"In many cases the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), the Israel Police and the Border Police have apparently breached their own internal regulations on the use of force, as well as international human rights standards on the use of force and firearms," Amnesty International said.

More than 80 people, including children, nearly all of them Palestinians from the Occupied Territories and Israel, have died since clashes began on 29 September 2000 between Israeli security forces and Palestinian demonstrators all over the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as well as in Israel. There have also been armed confrontations between the Israeli and Palestinian security forces.

An Amnesty International delegation is currently in Israel and the Occupied Territories, including the areas under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority, to examine policing of demonstrations in view of the loss of life. The delegation is composed of Dr. Stephen Males, a former senior Police officer of the UK police with special expertise in

sensitive public order policing, and Dr Elizabeth Hodgkin, a researcher from the International Secretariat of Amnesty International.

The delegates have met NGOs, doctors and over 50 witnesses to the events. They have visited to sites in Ramallah, Nablus, East Jerusalem, Nazareth, Arabah and other parts of northern Israel, places where demonstrators have died after the Israeli security forces fired on demonstrators and rioters. The delegates have seen large quantities of expended and some live ammunition, rubber-coated metal bullets, CS grenades and projectiles, during visits to sites of demonstrations, as well as bullets embedded in surrounding homes and much bullet damage.

Amnesty International has compiled the following preliminary conclusions:

- In many cases security forces apparently used firearms when their lives and the lives of others were not in imminent danger. However, according to internationally adopted principles, law enforcement officials shall only use firearms, if other means remain ineffective or without any promise of achieving the intended result. Firearms may be used against people, after appropriate warnings are given, only to prevent death or serious injury where less extreme means are insufficient to achieve these objectives. The standards underscore that law enforcement officials may resort to the intentional lethal use of firearms only when strictly unavoidable to protect life.

- In some instances, Israeli security forces impeded wounded persons from receiving access to medical assistance. Security forces also reportedly fired on people helping to remove the wounded, in two cases killing ambulance men. The International Committee of the Red Cross has publicly appealed to all parties to protect and assist the injured and all medical personnel in their vital life-saving operations.

- In instances where the security forces have not been deployed against demonstrators, riots have generally not evolved and crowds have dispersed. For example, after two days in which two Palestinians were killed in demonstrations in Um al-Fahm in Israel on 1 and 2 October, on 3 October security forces did not arrive to police a demonstration and demonstrators dispersed peacefully.

Two Palestinian refugees were also reported killed in south Lebanon on 7 October when Israeli troops opened fire across the Lebanese-Israeli border on demonstrators protesting against Israel.

On 7 October, three Israeli soldiers were captured at about noon by the Lebanese armed group Hizbullah. Amnesty International calls on Hizbullah to accord the three soldiers prisoner of war status and to allow them immediate access to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Amnesty International notes that Hizbullah has publicly stated its intention to use the three Israeli soldiers to secure the release of Lebanese and other Arab prisoners held in Israel.

Amnesty International reminds Hizbullah that hostage-taking is prohibited by international law and is inconsistent with fundamental principles of international humanitarian law. Amnesty International has long called for the release of Lebanese detainees held in Israel as hostages, including Shaykh 'Abd al-Karim al-'Ubayd and Mustafa al-Dirani.

A national commission established by the Israeli government will investigate killings which occurred in Israel. However, it is important that all killings are investigated which occurred in circumstances suggesting that they violated international law and standards. Investigations should be conducted by an independent and impartial body and by one which, in the current highly-charged political atmosphere, is perceived as such.

Amnesty International is therefore calling on the United Nations to establish urgently an independent international investigation, to include criminal justice experts known for their impartiality and integrity, to investigate all killings of civilians that took place since 29 September in Israel, the Occupied Territories and south Lebanon.

"To ensure independence and impartiality of the international investigation, its members should exclude persons whose background could appear to lack impartiality," Amnesty International said.

"The investigation should be properly resourced and include ballistic, forensic or other technical experts that may be required. It should report to the Commission on Human Rights, the General Assembly and the Security Council, and the authorities concerned should be obliged to cooperate fully with the investigation."

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>