

Israel/Occupied Territories: Israeli settlers wage campaign of intimidation on Palestinians and internationals alike

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Israeli settlers in the Occupied Territories have stepped up attacks against Palestinians and are waging a campaign of intimidation against international and Israeli human rights activists. Their aim is to eliminate the presence of witnesses to their attacks, thereby depriving the local Palestinian population of this only form of limited protection.

Two US citizens, members of the Christian Peacemaker Team (CPT), were assaulted on 29 September by masked Israeli settlers who beat them with clubs and chains as they accompanied Palestinian children to school near the Tuwani village, South of Hebron. Kim Lamberty sustained a broken arm and knee and bruising to her face, while Chris Brown was left with a punctured lung and multiple bruises. Members of the CPT and other Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have been escorting Palestinian children to school to protect them from attacks by Israeli settlers.

A group of hooded Israeli settlers attacked Amnesty International delegates and members of the CPT and the Operation Dove NGO on 9 October as they returned from accompanying Palestinian primary schoolchildren back to their home. The attackers first threw stones at the five internationals and then attacked three of them with wooden clubs. An Amnesty International delegate sustained multiple bruises on her back, arm and leg and the Operation Dove member collapsed and had to be taken to hospital by ambulance. On both occasions, the attackers came from the nearby Israeli settlement of Havat Ma'on and returned there after the attacks.

Rather than taking steps to stop and prevent such attacks and hold Israeli settlers accountable, the Israeli army and security forces have responded by imposing further restrictions on the local Palestinian population.

After the attack, the Israeli army informed the Palestinian villagers that, if the children are accompanied by internationals on their way to and from school, no army patrol will be on site to protect them from Israeli settlers. The Palestinian villagers reluctantly accepted that the schoolchildren have make to the journey without their international escort, but, two days later, on 12 October, the children were again chased by Israeli settlers from the Havat Ma'on settlement while on their way to school. The Israeli army patrol, which was present, did not intervene. Israeli settlers again threw stones as the children passed near the settlement on their way to school on 17 October.

The only alternative is for the schoolchildren to avoid passing near the Israeli settlements by making a long detour that lengthens their walk from 20 minutes to more than two hours each way.

As in previous years around the time of the olive harvest, Israeli settlers have also stepped up attacks on the local Palestinian inhabitants and farmers throughout the West Bank, preventing them from harvesting their crops and destroying or damaging their trees. The Israeli army has done little or nothing to stop the settlers' attack and has, instead, banned the Palestinian farmers from going to their fields, ultimately helping the settlers to force the Palestinians off their land.

Throughout the West Bank, Palestinian farmers are increasingly worried that their olives, one of their few remaining sources of livelihood, are being stolen, destroyed or wasted as they are prevented from working in their fields.

In the northern West Bank region of Nablus, where Palestinian villages are surrounded by Israeli settlements and settlers' roads, the Israeli army is only allowing Palestinian farmers between two and six days -- on set dates -- to go to their fields to harvest their olives. Palestinian farmers who have tried to go to pick their olives on days other than the set dates have been attacked by

settlers and turned away by Israeli army patrols. In the meantime, Israeli settlers have been picking olives in Palestinian groves and have destroyed and burned olive trees in various areas.

Palestinian farmers, accompanied by internationals from the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program, were harvesting their olives in Yanun, near Nablus, on 7 October when two settlers and eight soldiers came and told them to leave. The soldiers did not intervene when armed settlers assaulted a Palestinian farmer, fired shots on the ground near him and tied his hands. The farmer was left handcuffed until a member of the Israeli peace group Taayush (Co-existence) arrived at the scene and intervened with the soldiers.

Palestinian villagers in Yanun have been subjected to attacks by Israeli settlers for years and several families have been driven from the village by repeated attacks against them and their property. All remaining inhabitants were forced to flee the village by Israeli settlers in October 2002. They were later able to return with the help of Israeli and international peace activists. Promises by the Israeli army to keep the Israeli settlers in check have produced no results and settlers have continued to attack and intimidate the villagers with impunity.

In the southern Hebron region, on 15 October, after Israeli peace activists from Rabbis for Human Rights had coordinated with the Israeli army that the Palestinian farmers harvest their olives on that day, the farmers were attacked by armed settlers. The Israeli army patrol responded by telling the Palestinian farmers to leave, claiming that they did not have sufficient forces to protect them from the settlers.

Two days later in Yassuf, near Nablus, Palestinian farmers, accompanied by Israeli and international peace activists, were once again evicted from their olive grove when Israeli settlers turned up. The soldiers, whose presence was supposed to ensure that the Palestinians could harvest their olives, told the farmers and their Israeli and International helpers to leave.

On 11 October, a 26-year-old Palestinian farmer, Hani Shadeh, was shot and seriously wounded in the neck by an Israeli settler as he was picking olives with other farmers in Asira al-Qibliya, a village near Nablus and near the Israeli settlement of Yitzhar. The day before, Israeli settlers had set fire to an olive grove near the Israeli settlement of Tapuach.

Israeli settlers responsible for attacks on Palestinians and their properties have not been brought to justice in the vast majority of cases. Such impunity encourages settlers to commit further attacks and abuses. In the rare cases when Israeli settlers have been brought to justice, they have been treated with a degree of leniency uncommon in other cases.

On 27 September, an Israeli settler from the Elon Moreh Settlement near Nablus shot a Palestinian taxi driver dead. Sayyed Jabara, father of eight, was driving his passengers between Nablus and Salem. The settler claimed that he shot Sayyed Jabara because he thought that he intended to attack him, even though Jabara was not armed. He was released on bail less than 24 hours after the murder.

Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories, established by Israel in violation of international law, are the main reason for the stringent restrictions imposed on the Palestinian population. Some three-and-a-half million Palestinians are prevented from moving between towns and villages; confined to isolated enclaves and cut off from their workplace, their land, health and education facilities and other crucial services.

This is done to keep Palestinians away from Israeli settlements and from the network of roads built for the exclusive use of some 380,000 Israeli settlers. Settlements also continue to be expanded and new ones to be set up on expropriated Palestinian land.

Israeli settlers who attack and harass Palestinian villagers frequently come from settlements established without formal government authorization and which the Israeli authorities have

publicly pledged to dismantle. However, settlers are increasingly influential in the army, in government and in parliament. The rare attempts by the Israeli army and security forces to dismantle unauthorized settlements have been mostly half-hearted, with settlers simply refusing to leave or allowed to return to the site shortly after having being evacuated.

In recent months, the Israeli government has announced its intention to dismantle all Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip, one of the most densely populated places in the world where the presence of some 6,000 Israeli settlers has resulted in one-and-a-half million Palestinians being confined to less than 60% percent of the land. However, the Israeli government has no intention to evacuate more than 100 settlements in the West Bank, which take up some of the most fertile Palestinian land and best water resources. On the contrary, Prime Minister Sharon's bureau chief recently confirmed that the planned pullout from the Gaza Strip is intended to strengthen Israel's hold of large parts of the West Bank.

Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the Israeli authorities to take measures to evacuate Israeli settlers from the Occupied Territories and, in the meantime, to prevent attacks by Israeli settlers, to investigate the numerous attacks committed by settlers and to bring those responsible to justice. Amnesty International has also repeatedly called on Palestinian armed groups to stop targeting Israeli civilians both inside Israel and in the Occupied Territories.

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For further information:

Israel and the Occupied Territories:

The issue of settlements must be addressed according to international law

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE150852003?open&of=ENG-ISR>

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