Report by B'Tselem human rights group highlights Israeli brutality against Palestinians

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The Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem issued a 51-page report December 6 entitled *Illusions of Restraint: Human rights violations in the occupied territories September 29 - December 2, 2000*.

It details Israel's use of force to disperse demonstrations, attacks by settlers on Palestinians and the imposition of restrictions on the free movement of Palestinians, medical teams and journalists, alongside instances of Palestinian reprisals against Israeli civilians. It concludes with pleas to both Israel and the Palestinians to end the violence and calls for the convening of an independent international commission to investigate human rights abuses.

The report purports to take a "balanced" approach towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the suggestion of equal responsibility is false. The catalyst for the current crisis was the provocative visit by right wing Likud party leader Ariel Sharon to shared holy places in Jerusalem. This has been followed by ever more brutal attacks on Palestinians by the Israeli military, resulting in over 300 deaths, including many children. Whereas the Zionist state of Israel receives billions from Washington to finance its modern weaponry, the Palestinians are a dispossessed people seeking to defend themselves against the most powerfully armed state in the region.

Despite its false premise of equal culpability, in seeking to comprehensively outline developments over the last two months, the report does highlight Israeli brutality. It notes that during the period under examination, 264 people have been killed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, including both civilians and soldiers. Of these 84 percent were civilians and 27 percent were 17 years old or younger. During the same period, some 10,000 Palestinians were injured—approximately 20 percent by live ammunition, 38 percent by rubber bullets and 31 percent by inhaling tear-gas. The official website of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) puts Israeli injuries over the same period at 362, one-third of whom are civilians. The report quotes IDF spokesman Colonel Reisner, who cynically counters allegations of excessive force by the Israeli military by dividing the number of wounded by the number of demonstrations. This results in an "average" of one person injured per demonstration, Reisner claims, allegedly disproving that excessive force has been used.

The report undertakes a detailed examination of the ‘Open-Fire Regulations,' covering situations in which the Israeli military are permitted to fire on demonstrations with live rounds.

The regulations had previously stated, “firing live ammunition is only allowed where a real and immediate threat to life exists. In such instances, it is permissible to shoot to injure the person who constitutes the danger.” The United Nations' own article on this matter emphasizes that “exceptional circumstances such as political instability or public emergency may not be invoked to justify any departure from these principles.”

In the past seven weeks, however, the report points out that a number of changes were made to the regulations. The exact nature of these changes is not clear, but press reports have referred to the introduction of a “certain flexibility” into the regulations. Colonel Reisner has stated that the definition of “life threatening” is purely subjective. Therefore, as the report observes, “Because firing in life-threatening

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cases is always allowed, the change indicates that soldiers are now also allowed to fire when the threat to life is not immediate, or even in cases in which there is no threat to life at all. In practice, the army is allowing the firing of live ammunition in cases of stone throwing, and no change of definition is involved." Official IDF figures note that 73 percent of incidents in recent weeks did not involve any Palestinian gunfire.

The regulations now differ from one day to the next. The testimony of an IDF sniper states—"The directives provide that we be very selective, very precise and by the time we fire, we're worn out." A soldier doing compulsory military service stated in his testimony-"After the lynching [of three Israeli military personnel in Ramallah], the orders were changed, and they said that if a soldier feels in danger from the throwing of stones or Molotov cocktails, he is authorized to fire at the legs, even without consulting with the commander. I asked the soldiers with me and they understood that, in effect, they were allowing us 'with a wink' to fire wherever we want."

With regard to the firing of rubber bullets, the regulations state that they are "to be aimed solely at the legs of a person who has been identified as one of the rioters or stone-throwers". However, the US organisation Physicians for Human Rights, found that "the large number of head and eye injuries from 'rubber' bullets indicate improper use of the ammunition, which, if used properly, would cause such injuries rarely, if ever."

The report observes, "Rubber bullets come in packs of three encased in nylon. The Open-Fire Regulations state that, 'A pack of rubber cylinders is to be fired when encased with the original and intact covering.'" An IDF soldier's testimony helps to explain the unusual injuries. The commanding officer "taught us about rubber bullets, he said that they are fired bound in threes, which is ineffective for the most part, because they are too heavy. But if we separate them, they can kill. He added, winking, I am not hinting at anything...The guys laughed and said to him: 'You're not hinting - you're telling us.' He did not correct them."

Commenting on the use of "live" ammunition, General Giora Eiland, head of IDF Operations Branch, wrote, "The fact that most of the persons injured were struck in the upper part of the body or head is a positive thing."

In keeping with its "even-handed" presentation of events, the report concludes "Israel bears primary responsibility for human rights violations in the Occupied Territories over the past two months. However, the Palestinian Authority also committed human rights violations during this period."

Israel has justified the fact that a quarter of those killed by its forces were children, by claiming that the Palestinian Authority (PA) encourages their participation in demonstrations. Although B'Tselem regards Israel's policy as the primary reason for the deaths, it goes on to state that this does not discharge the PA from "irresponsible practices".

"B'Tselem found no evidence that the PA expressly encourages children to go to the scene of confrontation with soldiers", the report admits. "However, B'Tselem found no evidence to indicate that the PA is making a serious effort to prevent children from reaching the site of demonstrations and participating in them". B'Tselem also condemns the PA for firing from within the homes of civilians, and asserts that because of this it bears some responsibility for ensuing civilian injuries.

Israel is the primary source of allegations that the PA deliberately sends children to demonstrations, so that if they are subsequently shot by the IDF Yassir Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) can use this as anti-Israeli propaganda.

Such cynical claims are part of the means by which Israel is pressuring the PA to clamp down on the Palestinian masses more forcibly. By giving credibility to these allegations, the B'Tselem report also grossly overestimates the PLO's authority over the demonstrators and gives succour to Israeli demands.

B'Tselem soon intends to publish a report on "Actions Initiated by the IDF", including the intentional shelling of Palestinian police stations and the intentional killing of Palestinians.

The B'Tselem report *Illusions of Restraint: Human rights violations in the occupied territories*, can be downloaded at: http://www.btselem.org

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