Human rights groups condemn Israel for assassinations and indiscriminate killing

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Human rights organisation Amnesty International (AI) has condemned Israel for operating a deliberate policy of assassinating leading figures in the Palestinian intifada.

Describing this as a "policy of state assassinations," AI demanded an end to the practice by the Israeli government and its armed forces and for the US to review its weapons' sales to Israel. Curt Goering, Deputy Executive Director of Amnesty International USA, said, "There is clear cause for concern that US-made weapons are being used in attacks on Palestinians, since the US is the major supplier of arms to Israel."

Amnesty field workers investigated a number of cases in which the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) targeted Palestinian leaders for assassination. The most high profile murder took placed on February 13, when an Israeli helicopter gunship fired missiles at a car in the Gaza Strip, killing Massoud Ayyad, a member of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's elite Force 17 bodyguard unit.

Israel's outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Barak said of the killing, "Anyone who intends to harm Israelis will not escape and the long arm of the Israel Defence Forces will know how to locate and even the score with them."

The most recent targeted killing took place on February 19, when Israeli Special Forces gunned down a leader of Hamas in a refugee camp near Nablus.

Goering said of the investigations, "Our researchers determined that some of those killed could and should have been arrested instead. "Furthermore, they found that Israeli forces killed six Palestinian bystanders in a reckless and disproportionate use of force."

Taxi driver and alleged Hamas activist Hani Abu Bakra was gunned down on a road in the Gaza Strip in December 2000 by five soldiers standing only two metres away. He could easily have been arrested, but instead the soldiers opened fire on a minibus full of people. Abu Bakra was killed, another Palestinian was fatally wounded and a third was disabled.

The Palestinians have accused Israel of targeting around 20 local Palestinian leaders for assassination, since the current intifada began last September.

AI investigated other killings by the IDF that were the result of excessive, random or negligent use of force by Israeli security forces, especially at checkpoints or during shooting at residential areas. One such case involved a woman shot in a car passing a checkpoint, and another was the killing of a child harvesting vegetables, shot from about 800 metres away.

AI also found evidence that Israeli forces had used high explosive air burst weapons on several occasions. One of these, the M203 grenade launcher, fires projectiles designed to explode 15 metres or less above the ground, causing injury or death to anyone in the area. In one incident described by Amnesty, five youths were wounded and one, Hani al-Sufi, 15, was killed when shrapnel in a narrow alleyway hit them. An examination of shrapnel collected at the incident suggested that an M203 grenade launcher had been used.

Another report by the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued Wednesday accused the Israeli military of using indiscriminate force in response to Palestinian gunfire, causing excessive civilian casualties.

HRW documented nine civilian deaths and many serious injuries caused by Israeli fire in the West Bank city of Hebron. Washington Director of the Middle East and North Africa Division of HRW, Joe Stork, said, "Israeli forces are causing civilian deaths by firing

indiscriminately into Hebron's Palestinian neighbourhoods. The Israeli military is obligated to protect Palestinian civilians from heavy fire, and should take the necessary steps to halt this pattern of indiscriminate and excessive fire."

In one incident highlighted by HRW, on the night of February 17, the IDF responded to Palestinian gunfire by targeting the Abu Snainah neighbourhood of Hebron and a Palestinian collective farm located on the outskirts of Hebron. Three Palestinian civilians were killed and at least five wounded. The IDF killed 29-year-old Issam al-Tawil as he was driving home with his parents, his brother and his sister-in-law. Three of the four workers present at the al-Rayyan collective farm were hit by the IDF, killing Shaker al-Manasra and seriously injuring Yusuf al-Manasra and Ahmad Farajullah, who later died of his wounds. The surviving workers and the manager of the collective denied that there had been any gunfire from the farm.

The IDF also fired on the al-Mezan hotel, which was hosting two wedding parties with more than a thousand guests.

HRW provides a partial list of incidents in Hebron in which Palestinian civilians were killed or severely injured by the "persistent indiscriminate use of deadly force by the IDF." The incidents documented include:

* On October 13, 2000, IDF soldiers shot 22-year-old student Shadi al-Wawi, as he was sitting on the roof of his relative's home in the al-Fawar refugee camp. Soldiers fired several shots at the family as they tried to rescue al-Wawi, and threatened a medical team that tried to reach him. Al-Fawar died on the way to hospital.

* On October 18, IDF soldiers shot 38-year-old Ibrahim Abu Turki as he rode his donkey from his home village of Kilkas, leaving him paralysed.

* On October 23, the IDF shot dead 57-year-old Abdul Aziz Abu Snainah as he went to his front room to answer a phone call. The IDF shot at Abu Snainah's brother in the street as he tried to come to his assistance. HRW researchers counted more than 60 medium calibre bullet scars on the home.

* On November 11, the IDF killed Munib Abu Munshar as he was unloading his truck. There were no clashes taking place at the time.

* On November 16, IDF soldiers fatally shot 31-year-old Yusuf Abu Awad near a checkpoint in Beit Umar.

Soldiers had asked Abu Awad to stop at the checkpoint, and then began throwing stones at his car. When Abu Awad protested a soldier shot him in the face.

* On December 31, IDF fire in the Haret al-Sheikh neighbourhood of Hebron injured 18-year-old Arit al-Qawasma in the right shoulder and face while she was in her bedroom. As she was being evacuated from the house, IDF fire killed 11-year-old Muath Abu Hadwan and wounded another boy. The IDF also shot 13-year-old Abir Salameh in the stomach as she went to feed her chickens.

* On January 5, IDF fire hit 18-year-old Ahlam al-Jabali and her 18-year-old sister-in-law, Arij al-Jabali, as the two were seeking shelter in the stairwell of their home. Arij was killed in the incident, and the same bullet injured her sister-in-law.