

Report denounces Israel's human rights abuses

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The State of Human Rights in Israel 2003, the newly released annual report of the Association of Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), provides a picture of the systematic abuse of social, economic and political freedoms.

The report says of the Likud-led government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, "Although this government cannot be held solely responsible for the decline, it is clearly guilty of perpetuating and even exacerbating the situation through acts such as denying legitimate rights to the Arab minority, devaluing the courts' status as a guardian of democracy, favouring the welfare of the few over the many, and delivering an almost fatal blow to vital social services such as health, housing, education and social welfare.

"Government actions have also led to the lack of gainful employment, and the right of workers to fight for their working and retirement conditions, the delegitimisation of political rivals at the cost of fundamental democratic principles of freedom of speech and equality before the law. And in the territories, a complete decimation of human rights has taken place, as well as unprecedented injury to innocent civilians."

The author, Naama Yashuvi, received help from a number of Israeli lawyers in compiling the report. She said that human rights abuses have become a daily reality in the Occupied Territories, and that "most of these abuses occur not as a result of operational necessity on the part of the IDF [Israeli Defence Forces], but from vindictiveness on the part of the soldiers, who receive implicit approval to denigrate the dignity, life and liberty of innocent Palestinian civilians."

While the army claims that such actions are contrary to official policy and any complaints are investigated thoroughly, the military judge's own data shows that most incidents and even deaths are not investigated. Firstly, incidents resulting in deaths are not investigated if they occur during combat. Secondly, of the 362 internal investigations between September 2002 and June 2003, fewer than 13 percent resulted in formal charges and most of these were for property crimes rather than the crimes of violence and misuse of firearms that constituted the majority of the complaints.

The ACRI report condemns the IDF's system of roadblocks and physical blockades. Situated around every single one of the Palestinian villages, they routinely provide an opportunity for aggressive behaviour by the IDF, including deliberate and arbitrary delays without any security justification. A recent incident involved a soldier engraving a Star of David onto a 19-year-old student's arm with a piece of broken glass.

In June 2002, the IDF imposed a system of roadblocks that have completely cut off three villages near the city of Nablus in the West Bank. As a result, 11,000 residents have been penned in. For 12 months, they have not been able to travel, earn a living, or receive health care treatment or education. Yet, earlier this month Israel's Supreme Court turned down an application to dismantle the physical barriers on the grounds that the army's methods were not unreasonable or disproportionate.

While the security forces claim in court that they allow Palestinians

through the roadblocks to receive emergency medical treatment, they rarely do so in practice. It is routine to hold up ambulances for up to an hour at a roadblock, and an ambulance will typically have to go through several roadblocks to reach a patient. Many people have lost their lives due to delayed medical treatment. It is not unknown for women to have to give birth by the roadside and to lose their babies as a result.

The report states that in the Mount Hebron area soldiers "imposed a reign of intimidation and terror on the local population without any military justification whatsoever."

Soldiers would prevent farmers from working in their fields, carry out destructive house-to-house searches, and wake villagers in the middle of the night with ear-piercing sirens. In a few instances, soldiers would park their armoured vehicles and rev up their engines, creating clouds of smoke and choking the residents. Yet despite filmed evidence, IDF commanders turned a blind eye, sending a clear signal that deliberate harassment was entirely acceptable.

As regards Israel's curfew policy, the report states that last year, 45,000 people in the old city of Hebron were kept under curfew for six months. The total curfew was lifted occasionally after several weeks, but even then only for a few hours at a time. The ostensible reason was the frequent clashes between 400 ultra-religious Zionist settlers and the Palestinian residents, but whilst Palestinians were confined to their homes for days and weeks on end, the settlers were free to move around as they wished. Most of the Palestinian residents and those who worked in the old city lost their jobs as a result of the curfew, and some of the families faced starvation. Again the court rejected ACRI's petition to end the curfew.

Between June 2002 and May 2003, the people of Hebron endured 4,786 hours of curfew. Other cities fared little better. Jenin underwent 2,046 hours, Nablus 4,232 hours, Tulkarem 4,167 and Ramallah 2,419. It was not unknown for a curfew to be imposed without any prior warning. Anyone found outside his or her home during curfew hours was liable to be shot on sight. Between July and October 2002, at least 12 people lost their lives (usually children and youths) when soldiers opened fire on them.

The report states that the IDF assassinated 80 Palestinian militants in the 12 months to June 2003 and that the army admitted to at least 20 of the assassinations. These "targeted killings" of suspected militants, as the IDF calls them, also claimed the lives of 90 innocent bystanders—men, women and children—and injured more than 300 people. Statistics published by the Israel Air Force in June 2003 show that 25 to 30 percent of operations using helicopters hit innocent civilians. For example, when the IDF tried to assassinate the Hamas leader Abed el Aziz Rantissi, they killed his wife and baby and injured more than 20 Palestinians, including Rantissi.

In April 2002, during the Israeli invasion of Jenin, the IDF forced Palestinians at gunpoint to act as human shields for Israeli soldiers during military operations. The Palestinians—including children and old people—were made to stand in front of the soldiers, knock on doors, remove suspicious objects from the streets, order people to leave their

homes, and stand in front of soldiers while they were being fired on.

Though the IDF formally prohibits the use of civilians as human shields after human rights organisations including ACRI, B'tselem and Adalah petitioned the Supreme Court, the practice continues.

ACRI notes an increasing decline in support for democratic norms over the last few years among wide layers of Israeli society, including general support for democracy and equality and rights of the Palestinian minority within Israel. A recent poll showed that only 77 percent of Jewish Israelis agreed that democracy was the best form of government. This was the lowest figure of all the 32 countries except Poland that have carried out similar polls. Fifty-three percent of Jewish Israelis questioned were opposed to equal rights for Arabs. Seventy-seven percent believed that a Jewish majority was needed for all decisions of national importance. Only 31 percent supported the idea of Arab parties joining a coalition government and 57 percent supported the emigration of Arabs from Israel.

In the past year, parliament has considered proposals that would previously have been seen as beyond the pale:

* In July 2002, the government supported a proposal to authorise the Israel Lands Authority and the Jewish Agency to distribute state lands for settlement for Jews only.

* In January 2003, just before the general election, the Central Election Committee tried to disqualify Dr. Ahmed Tibi, Azmi Bashara and the Bal'ad party from standing in the elections. While the Supreme Court overturned the decision, the Election Committee received a "worrying level of public support."

* There is growing support for the revocation of Israeli citizenship as a form of punishment for all those who are accused of being "traitors" or "cooperating with terrorist organisations," or for family members of anyone merely accused of carrying out a terrorist act. The revocation of citizenship, especially where this would leave the individual bereft of any citizenship, is specifically outlawed under international law. Such a proposal would be applied against the Palestinian population, but not against Jewish Israelis convicted of selling weapons to terrorist organisations or providing information to hostile states.

* There are increasing attempts to limit the right to freedom of speech. The report cites the closing down of Arab newspapers, the charging of 10 Arab students who took part in a peaceful protest rally opposing the actions of the IDF in Israel, and the interrogation and intimidation of the *Ha'aretz* journalist who uncovered an ongoing criminal investigation against Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for serious criminal offences.

* There is virtually no implementation of government plans for the development of the Arab sector. Despite the allocations in October 2000 by the previous Labour government of 4 billion NIS over four years for the structural improvements in the Arab sector in Israel, little has been spent.

* In May 2002, the government announced that it would freeze all new and pending citizenship applications where the foreign national spouse is of Palestinian origin, affecting in turn the citizen rights of the couple's children to health, education and social welfare.

The report also documents how successive governments have in the last decade, but particularly in the last two years, attacked the social, economic and political rights of Jewish Israelis and implemented policies that have benefited the financial elite at the expense of the overwhelming majority of the population. As a result, inequality has soared, making Israel one of the most unequal countries of the world.

* Unemployment benefits have been cut, eligibility curtailed and the period of prior employment doubled.

* Pensions have been cut by 4 percent and frozen at January 2001 levels until 2006.

* The guaranteed income was cut by 20-23 percent in 2002, with substantial cuts in housing aid, cancellation of rights to reduced municipal taxes, subsidised fares, and exemption from television licence fees. An

additional cut of 29 percent was authorised in January 2003.

* Housing aid has been scaled back.

* The health service package has disintegrated and charges increased.

* The Economic Austerity Plan introduced by Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu aims to limit and even prohibit the right to strike in the public sector and make a strike dependent upon a secret ballot.

* The Economic Austerity Plan proposes to privatise the penal system and thus bring about a further decline in Israel's prisons. The prisons are already some of the most crowded in the world; sanitation is poor and conditions are harsh, with prisoners being forced to sleep on the floor as a result of the sharp rise in numbers.

The ACRI report says, "the government's actions call into question the very basis of democratic principles, the social fabric, and the foundation of human rights in Israel."

Several points should be made. As the report's authors noted, Israel's Declaration of Independence promised that the State of Israel would foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants. It would be based upon freedom, justice and peace; it would uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens, irrespective of religion, race or gender; it would guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it would safeguard the holy places of all religions; and it would be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

The very opposite is the case today. The report states, "As the Declaration of Independence reaches its 55th year, we still have no freedom, no justice and no peace, no equality of social and political rights, no freedom of religion or conscience, and most certainly no loyalty to the principles laid out in the Charter of the United Nations".

The tragic irony of the nationalist project as the solution to the anti-Semitism and oppression that culminated in the Holocaust is Israel's association of the Jewish people—for so long connected with a progressive struggle for tolerance, freedom and equality—with the brutal suppression of another people. It demonstrates that the root causes of anti-Semitism and other forms of religious, racial and ethnic discrimination are to be found in economic, social and political not psychological factors.

But there is a further point to be made. Washington's support for Sharon's determination to hold on to, by what ever means necessary, the three-year-long illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza signals that no human rights abuses are too gross for the US and Western leaders to contemplate in the name of "the war on terrorism"—or, more accurately, in pursuit of their main client state's interests in the Middle East. It indicates the kinds of methods that the US will employ to subjugate the entire Middle East in its bid to gain control of the rich resources of the region. It also signals that in the not too distant future such methods will be employed against the working class in the advanced metropolitan countries.



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