

Amnesty International details Israeli war crimes in Lebanon

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An Amnesty International (AI) report published on Tuesday provides a chilling account of the death and destruction inflicted on the civilian population of Lebanon by the Israeli military during its month-long, US-backed offensive. Entitled “Deliberate destruction or ‘collateral damage’? Israeli attacks on civilian infrastructure”, the document demonstrates that the Israeli government is directly responsible for numerous war crimes against the Lebanese people.

AI executive deputy secretary general Kate Gilmore dismissed as “manifestly wrong” Israel’s claims that its attacks were legitimate and legal. “Many of the violations identified in our report are war crimes, including indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks. The evidence strongly suggests that the extensive destruction of power and water plants, as well as the transport infrastructure vital for food and other humanitarian relief, was deliberate and an integral part of a military strategy,” she told the press.

Gilmore also took issue with Israeli assertions that it had simply targeted Hezbollah positions and support facilities, blaming civilian deaths on Hezbollah’s use of civilians as a “human shield”. “The pattern, scope and scale of the attacks makes Israel’s claim that this was ‘collateral damage’, simply not credible,” she said.

The report was based on first-hand information gathered by a field mission to Lebanon, interviews with dozens of victims and discussions with UN, Lebanese and Israeli officials and non-government organisations, as well as official statements and media accounts.

Between July 12 and August 14, the Israeli air force conducted more than 7,000 air attacks in Lebanon, supplemented by 2,500 naval bombardments and an unknown number of artillery barrages. An estimated 1,183 people were killed, about one third of whom were children, 4,054 were injured and 970,000 people, or 25 percent of the total population, were displaced. Half a million people sought shelter in Beirut, many in parks and public spaces without basic facilities.

“The Lebanese government estimates that 31 ‘vital points’ (such as airports, ports, water and sewage treatment plants, electrical facilities) have been completely or partially destroyed, as have around 80 bridges and 94 roads. More than 25 fuel stations and around 900 commercial enterprises were hit. The number of residential properties, offices and shops completely destroyed exceeds 30,000. Two government hospitals—in Bint Jbeil and in Meis al-Jebel—were completely destroyed in Israeli attacks and

three others were seriously damaged,” the report stated.

The head of Lebanon’s Council for Development and Reconstruction, Fadl Shalak, estimated on August 16 that the damage amounted to at least \$US3.5 billion—\$US2 billion for buildings and \$US1.5 billion for infrastructure such as bridges, roads and power plants. Other government surveys indicate that the extent and cost of the destruction could be higher.

The AI cited the comments of senior Israeli military officers, demonstrating that civilians and civilian infrastructure were deliberately targeted as collective punishment for the entire Lebanese people. Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Dan Halutz told the *New York Times* that the Lebanese government was responsible for Hezbollah’s actions. He branded Hezbollah as “a cancer” that Lebanon must get rid of, “because if they don’t their country will pay a very heavy price.”

The report pointed out that international law governing the conduct of war prohibits any direct attack on civilian objects, as well as indiscriminate attacks that fail to distinguish between military and civilian targets. It also disputed Israeli claims that civilian facilities were legitimate military targets, because of their potential use by Hezbollah. AI pointed out that international law also bans disproportionate attacks—that is, those in which the “collateral damage” is excessive compared to direct military advantage to be gained.

The destruction of infrastructure was a deliberate policy designed to drive hundreds of thousands of civilians out of the south of the country and terrorise the Lebanese population as a whole. The aim was to make the entire southern region uninhabitable. The AI report explained: “With the electricity cut off and food and other supplies not coming into the villages, the destruction of supermarkets and petrol stations played a crucial role in forcing local residents to leave. The lack of fuel also stopped residents from getting water, as water pumps require electricity or fuel-fed generators,” the report stated.

The Israeli sea and air blockade, along with the extensive destruction of roads and bridges, compounded the humanitarian disaster by obstructing relief efforts. Ships carrying vital emergency supplies were held up for days, seeking guarantees of safe passage from the Israeli navy. On August 4, the Israeli air force severed the last significant road link to Syria, blocking an aid convoy bringing in 150 tonnes of relief supplies. The Lebanese health ministry estimated that 60 percent of the country’s hospitals had ceased to function by August 12 due to fuel shortages.

Israeli Justice Minister Haim Raimon notoriously declared: “All those now in south Lebanon are terrorists who are related in some way to Hezbollah.” On August 7, Israeli warplanes dropped a leaflet banning the movement of any vehicle south of the Litani River, turning the entire region into a free-fire zone. Yet, as the AI report explained: “[A]round 100,000 civilians were trapped in southern Lebanon, afraid to flee... Some were unable to move because of their age or disability, or simply because they had no access to transport. Residents were rapidly running out of food, water and medicines, and the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] reported that those who had managed to escape the region were arriving at aid stations in increasingly desperate conditions.”

According to a UN fact sheet issued on August 16, at least 15,000 civilian homes—houses and apartments—have been destroyed. AI noted that this figure was almost certainly an underestimate. The extent of the damage was graphically described by AI personnel in Lebanon:

“Amnesty International delegates visiting towns and villages in south Lebanon found that in village after village houses had been subject to heavy artillery shelling as well as having been destroyed by precision-guided, air-delivered munitions. The accuracy of these munitions and their trajectory were such that they struck one or more of the main support systems causing the building to collapse or partially collapse under its own weight. In Beirut a vast area of densely populated high-rise buildings, which were home to tens of thousands of people most of whom left apparently encouraged by Hezbollah for their own safety, was reduced to rubble by repeated air strikes.

“According to the United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL), on 15 August, 80 percent of the civilian houses had been destroyed in the village of Tayyabah, 50 percent in the villages of Markaba and Qantarrah, 30 percent in Mais al-Jebel, 20 percent in Hula, and 15 percent in Talusha. The following day, UNIFIL reported that in the village of Ghanduriyah 80 percent of the civilian houses had been destroyed, 60 percent in the village of Zibqin, 50 percent in Jabal al-Butm and Bayyadah, 30 percent in Bayt Leif, and 25 percent in Kafra.

“When Amnesty International delegates visited the town of Bint Jbeil, in the far south of the country, the centre of the city, where there had been a market and busy commercial streets leading from it, was devastated. Every building on the streets was destroyed, extensively damaged or beyond repair. The streets were strewn with the rubble and in that rubble was clear evidence of the cause of the damage, unexploded munitions, shrapnel and craters. The Israeli army seemed to have used every type of munition in its arsenal, with air-delivered munitions, artillery shelling and cluster bomb damage in evidence.”

Roads, bridges, water and electricity supplies, sewerage plants and infrastructure, port facilities and the Beirut international airports have been damaged or destroyed.

Throughout southern Lebanon, wells, water mains, storage tanks, pumping stations and water treatment works have been destroyed. Elsewhere in the country, water supplies have been severely disrupted as the bombing of roads has ruptured pipes. The report concluded that many of the attacks had been deliberate and served

no obvious military purpose.

At least 25 fuel depots were destroyed and 25 petrol stations destroyed or severely damaged. By the time of the ceasefire, the south of the county had no electricity. The bombing of Lebanon’s largest power station at Jiyeh not only cut power supplies but produced an environmental disaster when 15,000 tonnes of heavy fuel oil leaked into the sea creating a massive oil slick and polluting 150 kilometres of coastline.

In many cases, the destruction was completely wanton. Israeli warplanes attacked facilities at all of Lebanon’s main ports—Beirut, Tripoli and Sidon. Beirut’s modern lighthouse was destroyed along with the old lighthouse. “It is difficult to see what legitimate purpose these attacks could have had, given that the Israeli navy was blockading the port anyway,” the report declared.

Israeli air raids struck transmission stations used by Lebanese television and radio stations, including those with no links to Hezbollah. The Hezbollah-backed al-Manar television station was hit repeatedly. As AI pointed out, however, the fact that al-Manar broadcast Hezbollah propaganda did not make it a legitimate military target under international law.

As the AI report explained, the Israeli military deliberately targeted businesses, including the country’s few large factories.

“Privately owned factories and businesses across the country—economic entities whose destruction could not be seen to offer a military advantage outweighing the damage to civilians—have also been subjected to a series of debilitating air strikes, dealing a further crippling blow to the shattered economy. The Lebanese government estimated that unemployment in the country has now reached an approximate figure of 75 percent.

“The production facilities of companies in key industrial sectors, including Liban Lait in Baalbek, the country’s largest dairy farm; the Maliban glass works in Ta’neil, Zahleh; the Sada al-Din plastics factory in Tyre; the Fine tissue paper mill in Kafr Jara, Sidon; the Tabara pharmaceutical plant in Showeifat, Aaliyah; the Transmed shipping warehouse on the outskirts of Beirut; and the Snow lumbermill in Showeifat, Aaliyah, have been disabled or completely destroyed. Industry minister Pierre Gemayel said that nearly two thirds of the industrial sector had been damaged, and at least 23 large factories and dozens of small and medium-sized factories had been bombed.”

The devastation wrought by the Israeli offensive in Lebanon is clearly a terrible war crime. In concluding its report, Amnesty International called for the formation of an international tribunal into violations of international humanitarian law. While AI called for the actions of Hezbollah to be investigated alongside those of the Zionist state, it would be far more appropriate to call for an inquiry into the role of the Bush administration in aiding and abetting Israel’s war crimes, in particular by providing and replenishing its weaponry, and blocking any move for an immediate ceasefire.



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