

Human Rights Watch catalogues Israeli war crimes in Lebanon

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The US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) accused Israel of committing war crimes in a 50-page report released yesterday. Titled “Fatal Strikes: Israel’s indiscriminate attacks against civilians in Lebanon”, the report provided additional proof that the Zionist state is deliberately targeting civilians as part of its criminal strategy to terrorise and drive out the population of southern Lebanon.

“The pattern of attacks during the Israeli offensive in Lebanon suggests that the failures [to distinguish between combatants and civilians] cannot be explained or dismissed as mere accidents,” the report explained. “[T]he extent of the pattern and seriousness of the consequences indicate the commission of war crimes.”

HRW called on United Nations secretary general Kofi Annan to establish an International Commission of Inquiry to investigate Israel’s war crimes and to “formulate recommendations with a view to holding accountable those who violated the law”.

The report also produced further evidence that the Israeli military has systematically covered up and lied about its attacks on Lebanese civilians. “Human Rights Watch found no cases in which Hezbollah deliberately used civilians as shields to protect them from retaliatory IDF [Israeli Defence Force] attack,” it stated, contradicting Israeli claims. “In none of the cases of civilian deaths documented in this report is there evidence to suggest that Hezbollah forces or weapons were in or near the area that the IDF targeted during or just prior to the attack.”

These conclusions were drawn from extensive on-the-ground investigations by HRW staff in Lebanon. Researchers conducted interviews with victims and witnesses of Israeli attacks, and corroborated these reports with their own inspections of attack sites, and information from hospitals, humanitarian groups and government bodies. This process was conducted for a selection of Israeli missile and artillery strikes that killed a total of 153 civilians—more than one-third of the total reported Lebanese deaths in the first two weeks of the war.

One section of the report dealt with the July 30 massacre

in the southern Lebanese town of Qana. According to the organisation, initial estimates that almost 60 civilians had been killed in an Israeli air strike on a residential building underestimated the number of people who managed to escape from beneath the collapsed building. They put the total dead at 28, including 16 children, although this number may rise, as 13 people who remain missing may still be buried under the rubble.

Survivors angrily denied Israeli allegations that Hezbollah rockets had been fired from the area and that local residents had been used as “civilian shields” by militants. “If they [the Israelis] really saw the rocket launcher, where did it go?” Muhammed Mahmoud Shalhoub, a 61-year-old farmer who escaped the bombed building, told HRW. “We show Israel our dead, why don’t they show us the rocket launchers?” Another resident, Ghazi Aydaji, added: “If Hezbollah was firing near the house, would a family of over 50 people just sit there?”

Apart from survivors and Qana residents, HRW interviewed dozens of journalists, rescue workers, and international observers. No one reported seeing any evidence of a Hezbollah military presence in the destroyed building or anywhere in Qana.

None of this damning evidence prevented the Israeli military from yesterday announcing that its internal investigation concluded that the building had been targeted “in accordance with the military’s guidelines regarding the use of fire against suspicious structures inside villages whose residents have been warned to evacuate, and which were adjacent to areas from where rockets are fired towards Israel”. IDF Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Dan Halutz again accused Hezbollah of using civilians as defensive shields, and claimed that the attack would not have proceeded had Israel known civilians were in the building.

The report disproved all these lies. Far from being an aberration or mistake, the atrocity in Qana was only the worst known incident in Israel’s deliberate targeting of civilian areas.

In the first two weeks of Israel’s offensive, about 5,000

civilian homes were destroyed or damaged by air strikes. “Israel has caused large-scale civilian casualties by striking civilian homes, with no apparent military objective either inside the home or in the vicinity,” the report stated. “In some cases, warplanes returned to strike again while residents and neighbours had gathered around the house to remove the dead and assist the wounded.”

HRW provided detailed accounts of a number of attacks. In one case, Israeli warplanes and Apache helicopters launched a sustained bombardment of the southern Lebanese village of Srifa on July 19. “After the first bombing, villagers started fleeing to neighbouring villages for safety,” one resident reported. “Israel saw this from their drones, and they sent Apache helicopters to circle the village to prevent us from leaving. They started shelling the area around the village from airplanes.”

About three Israeli fighter jets then hit at least 13 homes, collapsing the buildings on the basements underneath, which were packed with residents. Between 26 and 42 civilians are believed to have been killed in the attack. The exact number remains unknown, as rescue workers have been unable to reach the village to recover the bodies, and Israeli warplanes and helicopters have prevented local residents from clearing the debris themselves. HRW researchers found no evidence of Hezbollah military activity in the area, confirming surviving residents’ reports that no rockets had been fired from the village.

The report also detailed numerous Israeli attacks on civilians fleeing southern Lebanon. On some days, precision missiles hit dozen of civilian cars. In one of the worst incidents yet documented, 21 civilians were killed on July 15 when an Israeli strike hit a convoy of villagers fleeing the Lebanese border village of Marwahin. After receiving an evacuation order from the IDF, the villagers sought refuge at a nearby UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) position. After being turned away, they drove north in a convoy of vehicles. Israeli helicopters then bombed two vehicles, killing 21 people, including 14 children and two pregnant women. None of the civilians were armed or in any way connected with Hezbollah.

Israel has also targeted medical personnel and aid convoys. In Qana, seven days before the massacre of at least 28 civilians, fighter jets hit two ambulances in the town as they were transferring three wounded civilians from one vehicle to another. “A weapon directly hit one ambulance, and a second attack struck the second ambulance a few minutes later,” the report stated. “All six of the Red Cross workers were injured during the attack, and the three patients they were treating suffered additional injuries. One of the patients, a middle-aged man, lost his leg in the ambulance strike, while his elderly mother was partially paralyzed. The

third patient, a young boy, received multiple shrapnel wounds to the head.”

HRW also condemned Israel’s use of cluster munitions, which have a terrible record of causing civilian casualties. The organisation is continuing to investigate Israel’s destruction of Lebanese infrastructure such as electricity grids, roads, and airports, and is also examining allegations of Israeli use of white phosphorous in Lebanon. White phosphorous is a chemical originally intended to illuminate battlefields. When used against people, however, it burns through clothing and skin, causing horrific injuries and deaths.

The litany of war crimes catalogued in the report provide overwhelming evidence that the Israeli offensive in Lebanon has nothing to do with fighting “terrorism” or with recovering the two IDF soldiers captured by Hezbollah last month. The assault is the culmination of years of military and political strategic planning within Israel, aimed at reducing Lebanon to the status of a degraded protectorate of the Zionist state, and crushing all anti-Israeli resistance in the country. The murder of hundreds of civilians and the creation of nearly a million Lebanese refugees is a central and necessary component of this criminal strategy.

HRW deals with none of these critical political issues, and makes no attempt to explain why Israel is murdering so many civilians. In the report’s recommendations, it appeals to the Israeli government to uphold international law and cease its indiscriminate attacks on civilians. It also calls on the Bush administration to suspend its weapons supply to Israel and to hold an investigation into how US-provided arms have been deployed in Lebanon.

Such appeals will fall on deaf ears and are entirely futile. The government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has made clear that it does not regard international law as being in any way applicable to Israel, and senior cabinet members have issued statements describing every civilian remaining in southern Lebanon as a legitimate target. The Bush administration’s contempt for precepts of international law is well documented—from detention without trial at Guantánamo Bay to the invasion of Iraq. In the present crisis, Washington has actively encouraged Tel Aviv in its criminal assault on Lebanon in order to forge what Condoleezza Rice has described as a “new Middle East”.



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