

Israeli military's killing of Nakba protesters must be investigated

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Israeli military's killing of Nakba protesters must be investigated

Amnesty International today called on the Israeli government to launch a full, impartial and independent investigation into the Israeli military's use of force yesterday against Palestinian and Arab demonstrators, after at least 12 people were killed and hundreds more injured at Israel's borders with Lebanon and Syria, as well as in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Palestinian refugees in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and neighbouring countries had organized large demonstrations at Israeli borders and checkpoints to commemorate Nakba Day - an annual day to mark the Nakba (catastrophe), the term used by Palestinians to describe the displacement and dispossession that accompanied the creation of Israel in 1948 when hundreds of thousands became refugees - and call for implementation of their right of return.

The Israeli government and military have characterized the protests as "riots" and attempts to "infiltrate" into Israel illegally, and in several of the protests, demonstrators threw rocks towards Israeli troops. According to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), 13 IDF personnel and three Israeli civilians were lightly injured by rocks, and protesters tried to breach the fence at the Lebanese and Syrian borders. Israeli officials have not claimed that any protesters fired on Israeli troops.

IDF troops responded by firing live ammunition, rubber-coated metal bullets, artillery shells and tear gas against the protesters. Amnesty International is seriously concerned at reports that the Israeli military used excessive force, killing and maiming individuals who were not posing a threat to the lives of the soldiers or others.

In Lebanon, thousands of Palestinian refugees and Lebanese activists marched towards the Israeli border at Maroun al-Ras. A Lebanese army statement said that 10 were killed and at least 112 were injured, some of them critically, by Israeli forces. The Israeli military has acknowledged that IDF troops opened fire towards demonstrators, but claimed that Lebanese army troops also fired on demonstrators and were responsible for some of the casualties. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which patrols the Israel-Lebanon border, confirmed that live ammunition had been used at Maroun al-Ras.

Israeli authorities reportedly prevented Palestinian citizens of Israel from reaching the Israeli side of the border with Lebanon for a planned solidarity demonstration. The Israeli Knesset (parliament) signalled its growing disapproval of events commemorating the Nakba by passing the Budget

Foundations Law (Amendment No. 40) 5771 - 2011 on 22 March 2011. This law allows the Minister of Finance to reduce state funding to institutions organizing any activities “commemorating Israel’s Independence Day or the day of the establishment of the state as a day of mourning.” It is only one example of legislation recently passed or pending in the Knesset which together constitute a major assault on freedom of expression in Israel. Amnesty International is particularly concerned that the law targets institutions serving Israel’s Palestinian Arab minority and threatens these citizens’ rights to preserve their history and culture.

Palestinian and Druze protesters in the Syrian-administered part of the Golan succeeded in breaching the UN-patrolled border and entering the town of Majdal Shams in the Israeli-occupied part. Israeli forces opened fire, killing two demonstrators and injuring more than 20, some of them critically. The IDF and Israeli police sealed off the town and conducted house-to-house searches for “infiltrators”, who were forcibly returned to Syria.

In the West Bank, up to a thousand Palestinians demonstrated near the Qalandiya checkpoint, which separates Ramallah from occupied East Jerusalem. Some protesters reportedly threw rocks at Israeli troops and attempted to attack parts of the wall/fence near the checkpoint. Israeli forces responded by firing rubber-coated metal bullets, tear gas canisters, and sound bombs at the demonstrators, and there are also reports that Israeli troops used live ammunition. Dozens of civilians were injured, some of them critically, with medics reporting that the majority were injured in the upper body. Over 100 people were treated by Palestinian medics for gas inhalation, with at least 20 reportedly suffering from seizures. Israeli forces arrested at least six people, including one who was reportedly badly injured after being hit in the head by a rubber-coated bullet.

Smaller demonstrations took place across the West Bank, and met with similar Israeli responses in several cases. Israeli forces have also arrested dozens of people in East Jerusalem since 13 May 2011, following clashes on Friday afternoon in Silwan, Issawiya and the Old City. Seventeen-year-old Milad Said Ayyash was shot in the abdomen, allegedly by a private security guard at the Beit Yonatan settlement in Silwan, and subsequently died from his wounds. His father testified to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) that he was walking down the road when he was shot, and that the immediate area was calm at the time.

In the Gaza Strip, hundreds of Palestinians marched from the northern town of Beit Hanoun towards the Israeli border and the Erez border crossing, which has been completely closed to Palestinians since June 2007, except for urgent medical cases receiving special Israeli permits. Israeli forces fired artillery shells, live ammunition, gas canisters, and sound bombs at protesters. PCHR reported more than 100 civilians were wounded, including 31 children, three women, and three journalists, some of them critically. Israeli forces also fired on a demonstration near ‘Abasan village, east of Khan Younis in the central Gaza Strip, resulting in further injuries. Finally, in a separate incident, 17-year-old Khamis Salah Mesleh Habeeb was killed by an Israeli artillery shell in the “buffer zone” near the Nahal Oz crossing east of Gaza City.

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