

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: MDE 15/060/2007 (Public)
News Service No: 170
5 September 2007

Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territories: Cutting vital supplies to Gaza would amount to collective punishment

Israeli government ministers are reported to have stated that they are considering cutting off water and electricity supplies to the Gaza Strip in response to the launching of home-made "qassam" rockets by Palestinian armed groups from Gaza into Israel.

Deputy Prime Minister Chaim Ramon told Israeli army radio: "We will set a price tag for every qassam, in terms of cutting off infrastructures...We will not continue to supply 'oxygen' in the form of electricity, fuel, and water while they are trying to murder our kids."

Cutting off the supply of basic necessities such as water and electricity -- which Gazans cannot obtain from elsewhere because of the blockades imposed by Israel -- would constitute collective punishment of Gaza's population in violation international humanitarian law, which prohibits all forms of collective punishment.

As the occupying power, Israel is ultimately responsible for ensuring the welfare of the 1.5 million Palestinians who live in the Gaza Strip. Israeli officials' contention that Israel is no longer bound the laws of occupation since it redeployed its forces to the perimeter of the Gaza Strip Israel is a fallacy.

Israel retains effective control of the Gaza Strip. It exercises full control over the Gaza Strip's land borders, air space and territorial waters, and the movement of people and goods -- every person, every truckload of food aid -- into and out of the Gaza Strip.

Moreover, the increasingly tight blockade imposed by the Israeli authorities on the passage of goods into and out of Gaza has paralyzed the economy and forced most of Gaza's population to become dependent on international aid.

Hence, in addition to its obligations under international humanitarian law to ensure the welfare of the population in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), Israel also has a responsibility to provide redress for the damage it causes to the population of Gaza -- whether as a result of air bombardments that destroy infrastructure or of the blockades that cripple economic activity.

Background

Palestinian armed groups frequently launch home-made "qassam" rockets from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel, often hitting the town of Sderot and its surroundings. These indiscriminate rockets have killed some 10 Israeli civilians in the past four years in Sderot and have spread fear among the population and damaged the town's economy. The Israeli army has retaliated by launching frequent air bombardments and artillery strikes in which hundreds of Palestinians have been killed, including dozens of children, since last year. Three Palestinian children were killed last week in an Israeli air strike that the army initially claimed was against rocket launchers but subsequently admitted it had mistakenly targeted children playing in fields.

AI has repeatedly called on Palestinian armed groups to cease such indiscriminate rocket attacks against Israel and has called on the Israeli army to put an end to disproportionate attacks that continue to kill unarmed Palestinian civilians.