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Palestinian Authority: Fatah and Hamas violations leave Gaza's civilians trapped in their homes - Growing concerns about violence spreading to the West Bank

Amid unprecedented political violence in the Gaza Strip, both Fatah and Hamas security forces and armed groups have shown utter disregard for fundamental principles of international law and have committed grave human rights abuses.

The indiscriminate attacks and reckless gun battles in residential neighbourhoods have left a beleaguered civilian population, already suffering from a year of international sanctions and continuing Israeli military blockades, virtual prisoners in their own homes. Both parties have killed captured rivals, and have abducted scores of members of rival groups and held them hostage, to be exchanged for friends and relatives held by their rivals. Killing captured fighters and hostage-taking are war crimes.

Rival security forces loyal to the Fatah party of PA President Mahmoud Abbas and the Hamas party of Prime Minister Isma'il Haniyeh, have signally betrayed their responsibility to uphold and enforce the law and to protect the population. Instead, acting in concert with the armed groups which serve as their proxy militias, they have engaged persistently in armed clashes, killing and injuring civilians not involved in the clashes with complete impunity.

Now that Hamas has gained control of Fatah's security forces installations in Gaza and repudiated President Abbas' decision to dissolve the coalition government and impose a state of emergency in the OPT, fears are growing that the fighting will spill over into the West Bank. In recent days Fatah's gunmen have been abducting Hamas members and holding them as hostages and ransacking Hamas offices in Nablus, Ramallah and elsewhere in the West Bank, deepening concern that abuses will increase if the fighting escalates there.

Palestinians calling for an end to the violence risk being killed. On 13 June gunmen in Gaza City and Khan Younes fired on unarmed demonstrators who were calling for an end to the armed clashes, killing one protester and injuring several others.

On the same day two Palestinian employees of the United Nation Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the main relief agency in the Gaza Strip, were killed and two others were injured in the course of their work by reckless shooting during Fatah-Hamas armed clashes. UNRWA also reported that gun battles took place inside two of its facilities.

Gunmen from both sides mounted attacks in and around hospitals, directly targeting and launching attacks from hospital buildings. On 12 June Gaza City's Shifa Hospital, the main hospital in the Gaza Strip, was attacked with heavy weapons, including rocket-propelled grenades and home-made mortars. Other hospitals from Rafah in the south to Beit Hanoun in the north also came under fire, as did several ambulances, putting patients and staff in danger, impeding the work of the medical staff and hindering access to healthcare for those in need.

The fighting has hampered the UN's ability to deliver emergency food aid and healthcare services. Such attacks constitute a gross violation of international law, which prohibits the targeting of civilians and indiscriminate attacks, and affords special protection to medical and humanitarian facilities, which must never be targeted or used for attacks or other activities which compromise their neutrality.

Educational institutions have also been damaged as a result of reckless gun battles and indiscriminate attacks and all aspects of life in the Gaza Strip have been virtually paralysed.

Amnesty International is calling on Fatah and Hamas leaders to take immediate action to ensure that their forces and the armed groups acting as their proxy militias cease endangering civilians and violating international law through their reckless, disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force in Gaza, and to prevent further abuses in the West Bank - notably:

- to assert control over the security forces and ensure that they uphold the law and respect human rights, including international standards relating to the use of force and treatment of prisoners, and ensure that members of their security forces who abuse human rights or fail to carry out their duty are held to account;
- end impunity, by establishing effective mechanisms to bring to justice those responsible for human rights abuses, irrespective of their political affiliation;
- instruct their security forces that the armed groups who commit human rights abuses or crimes must be apprehended and brought to justice, irrespective of their political affiliations, in accordance with international human rights law and standards;
- put in place a mechanism to ensure independent, impartial and non-partisan oversight of the security forces and ensure that all killings, abductions and other attacks on civilians are investigated and that those responsible are brought to justice.