

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT



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Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territories: All sides must protect civilians in Gaza and Israel following ceasefire announcement

Following a ceasefire announcement after four days of attacks that endangered civilians throughout the Gaza Strip and a large part of Israel, Amnesty International again called on Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups to respect international humanitarian law and refrain from indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks.

A ceasefire, achieved through Egyptian mediation between Israel, on the one hand, and Hamas and other Palestinian factions, on the other, took effect at 1am today and led to a marked reduction in violence.

An Israeli air strike on 9 March 2012 killed Zuhair al-Qaissi, Secretary-General of the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC), an armed group in the Gaza Strip, and Mahmoud Hanini, also said to be active in the PRC. Israeli military spokespeople have claimed that Zuhair al-Qaissi was responsible for planning past attacks on Israel and that the PRC was planning another major attack in the coming days.

Following this attack, Palestinian armed groups launched indiscriminate rockets towards cities and villages in Israel; by today more than 200 rockets had been fired, according to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The Israeli air force launched more than 30 missile strikes against targets in Gaza, including some in densely populated residential areas. Israeli ground forces have also fired at Palestinians in the Israeli-imposed "buffer zone" adjacent to the fence surrounding the Gaza Strip, including at people participating in funeral processions.

The rocket attacks have reportedly injured at least eight Israeli civilians and damaged property. In Gaza, at least 25 Palestinians have been killed, including at least four civilians. At least two children have been killed: Ayoub Mohammed 'Assaliya on 11 March and Nayif Sha'aban Qarmout on 12 March. Dozens of Palestinian civilians have been injured, according to local human rights groups, some of them seriously.

Schools in southern Israel have been closed since 11 March, and residents have been taking refuge in bomb shelters when warning systems are activated. Schools were also closed in at least some parts of the Gaza Strip, following at least two Israeli air strikes on or near school facilities. There are no safe shelters or advance warning alarms for civilians in Gaza.

Doctors and emergency services in Gaza have been struggling to treat those injured over the last four days. Medical facilities in Gaza were already under strain due to severe shortages of fuel for electricity, and restrictions on the import of equipment under Israel's five-year blockade of Gaza. The Hamas de facto administration reported that some 350 housing units were damaged during the recent air strikes, adding to the already severe housing problems in the Strip.

Three years after the Israeli military's Operation "Cast Lead", during which hundreds of Palestinian civilians and three Israeli civilians were killed, accountability has not been established for war crimes and possible crimes against humanity committed by Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups. This impunity has contributed to the recent escalation in violence.

Civilian populations in both Gaza and Israel have again suffered the consequences of the long-standing armed conflict over the past four days. Amnesty International calls on all sides to fully respect international humanitarian law. Palestinian armed groups must stop launching indiscriminate rockets. Israel must desist from disproportionate and indiscriminate attacks. The victims of previous rounds of violence know all too well that the cost of violations of international humanitarian law is paid in human lives. Civilians are likely to pay the price yet again if the fragile ceasefire is not maintained.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or email: press@amnesty.org

International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK
www.amnesty.org