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This report documents human rights issues of concern to Amnesty International during 2006.

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Armed conflict and the legacy of former conflicts overshadowed other developments in the Middle East and North Africa region in 2006. Throughout the year, against the backdrop of foreign military presence, Iraq continued its inexorable descent into civil war as long-standing political, ethnic and religious fault lines were increasingly exposed amid unrelenting sectarian violence. By the end of the year, the country was enmeshed in killings and other violence, primarily by Sunni and Shi'a groups, that threatened the stability of the whole region.

The long struggle between Israelis and Palestinians in the Occupied Territories continued to take a heavy toll in civilian lives despite wide international recognition that the conflict was a major cause of political instability in the region and beyond. The 40-year unresolved struggle entered a new phase after Hamas won January's Palestinian elections, defeating the Fatah party led by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Frequent Israeli air and artillery attacks resulted in the deaths of more than 650 Palestinians, mostly in the Gaza Strip and mostly in the second half of the year. Further deaths of Palestinians, again mostly in the Gaza Strip, resulted from internecine fighting between members of armed groups linked to the rival Hamas and Fatah parties. Meanwhile, social and economic conditions for Palestinians living under Israeli occupation continued to go from bad to worse as Israel pushed forward its construction of settlements and the building of a 700-kilometre fence/wall in the West Bank, increased or tightened the blockades and restrictions on Palestinian movements, and withheld customs duties due to the Palestinian Authority.

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Women's rights

Women remained in a subordinate position - legally, politically and in practice - across the region as a deep-seated culture of gender discrimination continued to hold sway. However, some advances were achieved that offered encouragement to a growing women's rights movement.

In Kuwait, women participated for the first time in national elections and in Bahrain 18 women candidates stood in elections for the House of Representatives, although only one was successful. The Moroccan government announced that it would withdraw its reservations to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and took steps to strengthen legislation on domestic violence, and Oman acceded to CEDAW. In Saudi Arabia, there was some movement towards establishing a specialized court to deal with cases of domestic violence, but women continued to face pervasive forms of discrimination, including severe restrictions on their freedom of movement.

These and other developments represented a step forward but only a small and halting one, underlining just how much more needs to be done to give real substance to the notion of women's rights. "Honour killings" persisted in Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Iraq, Syria and other states in which the perpetrators benefited from laws that belittled their crimes. Throughout the region women were inadequately protected against other violence within the family. There were also worrying reports of trafficking of women in Oman, Qatar and other states.

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Discrimination

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The Israeli authorities imposed further discriminatory measures against Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation, including by reinforcing the system of segregated roads and checkpoints established on behalf of Israeli settlers residing in the Occupied Territories.

Refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants

Unsurprisingly, the conflict in Iraq and the war between Hizbullah and Israeli forces caused widespread internal displacement and large outflows of refugees into neighbouring countries. In both Israel and Lebanon, most of those displaced returned to their villages and neighbourhoods once the fighting stopped, although many Lebanese people did so only to find that their homes had been destroyed and their fields and orchards contaminated by unexploded cluster bomblets. Some 200,000 other Lebanese people were still displaced at the end of the year. Syria, together with Jordan, absorbed most of the refugees who fled the violence in Iraq; estimates suggested that more than half a million Iraqis had taken refuge in Syria by the end of 2006. In Lebanon, around 300,000 Palestinian refugees, in most cases refugees from events surrounding the creation of the state of Israel and the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, maintained a precarious existence, tolerated but far from fully accepted by Lebanese authorities who continued to deny or limit their access to certain basic rights.

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ISRAEL AND THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

<p>STATE OF ISRAEL Head of state: Moshe Katzav Head of government: Ehud Olmert (replaced Ariel Sharon in April) Death penalty: abolitionist for ordinary crimes International Criminal Court: signed but declared intention not to ratify</p>	
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Increased violence between Israelis and Palestinians resulted in a threefold increase in killings of Palestinians by Israeli forces. The number of Israelis killed by Palestinian armed groups diminished by half. More than 650 Palestinians, including some 120 children, and 27 Israelis were killed. Israeli forces carried out air and artillery bombardments in the Gaza Strip, and Israel continued to expand illegal settlements and to build a 700-km fence/wall on Palestinian land in the Occupied Territories. Military blockades and increased restrictions imposed by Israel on the movement of Palestinians and the confiscation by Israel of Palestinian customs duties caused a significant deterioration in living conditions for Palestinian inhabitants in the Occupied Territories, with poverty, food aid dependency, health problems and unemployment reaching crisis levels. Israeli soldiers and settlers committed serious human rights abuses, including unlawful killings, against Palestinians, mostly with impunity. Thousands of Palestinians were arrested by Israeli forces throughout the Occupied Territories on suspicion of security offences and hundreds were held in administrative detention. Israeli conscientious objectors continued to be imprisoned for refusing to serve in the army. In a 34-day war against Hizbullah in Lebanon in July-August, Israeli forces committed serious violations of international humanitarian law, including war crimes. Israeli bombardments killed nearly 1,200 people, and destroyed or damaged tens of thousands of homes and other civilian infrastructure. Israeli forces also littered south Lebanon with around a million unexploded cluster bombs which continued to kill and maim civilians after the conflict.

Background

Ehud Olmert became Prime Minister in April having exercised the powers of the office from January when Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a severe stroke. Ahead of the March legislative elections, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert announced his intention to implement unilaterally a "convergence" plan, under which Israel would annex Palestinian land west of the 700-km fence/wall being built by Israel in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and retain control of the Jordan Valley and the West Bank border with Jordan. According to this plan, Israel would annex some 12 per cent of the occupied West Bank, including the locations of all the main Israeli settlements, where more than 80 per cent of Israeli settlers reside.

Relations between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority (PA) deteriorated after the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) won the parliamentary elections in the Occupied Territories in January. The Israeli government had no official relations with the Hamas administration, although it maintained relations with PA President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah party.

Hizbullah-Israel war

In the 34-day war which broke out on 12 July, after Hizbullah's military wing crossed into Israel and attacked an Israeli patrol, killing three Israeli soldiers and capturing two others. Israeli forces carried out air and artillery bombardments, killing nearly 1,200 people in Lebanon, including hundreds of children. Israeli forces also destroyed tens of thousands of homes and commercial properties, mostly in south Lebanon and in the suburbs of Beirut; and targeted and damaged main roads and bridges throughout the country. Hizbullah missiles fired into Israel caused the deaths of 43 civilians and damaged hundreds of buildings.

In the course of the conflict Israeli forces committed serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including war crimes. In particular, Israeli forces carried out indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on a large scale. Israeli forces also appear to have carried out direct attacks on civilian infrastructure intended to inflict a form of collective punishment on Lebanon's people, in order to induce them and the Lebanese government to turn against Hizbullah, as well as to cause harm to Hizbullah's military capability.

At least six Lebanese nationals, most of them known or suspected Hizbullah fighters, remained detained in Israeli prisons at the end of the year, while Hizbullah did not disclose the fate or condition of the two Israeli soldiers it had captured. Indirect negotiations for a prisoner exchange were reportedly ongoing between the two sides. Israel suspended access by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to the prisoners it held after Hizbullah refused to grant such access to the two Israeli soldiers.

In the final days of the war, after the terms of the ceasefire had been agreed, Israeli forces launched hundreds of thousands of cluster bombs containing up to 4 million bomblets into south Lebanon. The million or so unexploded bomblets that were left continued to kill and maim civilians long after the end of the war. Some 200 people, including tens of children, had been killed or injured by these bomblets and newly laid mines by the end of the year. Despite repeated requests, Israel did not provide detailed maps of the exact locations where its forces launched cluster bombs to the UN bodies mandated to clear unexploded ordnance.

Killings of Palestinians

Israeli forces carried out frequent air and artillery bombardments against the Gaza Strip, often into densely populated refugee camps and residential areas. Some 650 Palestinians, half of them unarmed civilians and including some 120 children, were killed by Israeli forces. This toll was a threefold increase compared with 2005. On 27 June the Israeli army launched operation "Summer Rains" following an attack two days earlier by members of Palestinian armed groups on a military post inside Israel in which two Israeli soldiers were killed and a third – Corporal Gilad Shalit – was captured. Israeli attacks escalated dramatically after the capture of Gilad Shalit, although the preceding months had also been marked by killings of Palestinians and Israeli air and artillery bombardments in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

☞ On 9 June, seven members of the Ghalia family – five children and their parents – were killed and some 30 other civilians were injured when Israeli forces fired several artillery shells at a beach in the north of the Gaza Strip. The beach was crowded with Palestinian families enjoying the first weekend of the school holidays. The Israeli army denied responsibility for the killings but failed to substantiate their claim.

☞ In the early morning of 8 November, 18 members of the Athamna family were killed and dozens of other civilians were injured when a volley of artillery shells struck a densely populated neighbourhood of Beit Hanoun, in the north of the Gaza Strip. The victims, eight of them children, were killed in their sleep or while fleeing the shelling, which lasted for around 30 minutes and during which some 12 shells landed in the area. The Israeli authorities expressed regret for the killings, saying that the

houses were mistakenly struck due to a technical failure, but rejected calls for an international investigation. The attack came in the wake of a six-day Israeli army raid in Beit Hanoun codenamed "Autumn Clouds", during which Israeli forces killed some 70 Palestinians, at least half of them unarmed civilians and including several children and two ambulance emergency service volunteers. The raid also injured some 200 others, including scores of children.

Most Palestinians were killed in the Gaza Strip, although scores were also killed in the West Bank.

☞ Eight-year-old Akaber 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ezzat Zayed was shot dead by Israeli special forces who opened fire on the car in which she was travelling to hospital with her uncle, who was seriously injured in the attack. The incident took place on 17 March in Yamun village, near the northern West Bank town of Jenin.

☞ On 19 December, 14-year-old Dua'a Nasser 'Abdelkader was shot dead by Israeli soldiers as she approached the fence/wall with a friend near Fara'un, a village in the north of the West Bank.

Israeli forces continued to assassinate wanted Palestinians, killing and wounding bystanders in the process.

☞ Nine members of the Abu Salmiya family were killed when an Israeli F16 fighter jet bombed their home at 2.30am on 12 July. According to the Israeli army, a senior leader of Hamas' armed wing was in the house at the time of the strike but survived. However, the strike wiped out an entire family: the owner of the house, Nabil Abu Salmiya, a Hamas political leader and university lecturer; his wife Salwa; and seven of their children all aged under 18. Dozens of neighbours were also injured and several other houses were damaged in the strike.

Attacks by Palestinian armed groups

Killings of Israelis by Palestinian armed groups continued but decreased to half the previous year's figure and to the lowest level since the beginning of the intifada in 2000. In total, 21 Israeli civilians, including a child, and six soldiers were killed in Palestinian attacks in Israel and the Occupied Territories.

☞ Eleven Israeli civilians were killed and 68 others were injured in a suicide bomb attack claimed by the armed wing of Islamic Jihad on 17 April in Tel Aviv's old bus station.

☞ One of two suicide bombings, on 30 March, killed four Israeli civilians, one of them aged 16, near the entrance of the Israeli settlement of Kedumim, in the northern West Bank.

There was a significant increase in the launching of homemade "Qassam" rockets by Palestinian armed groups from the Gaza Strip into the south of Israel. In most cases these indiscriminate rockets caused no casualties, but two Israeli civilians, Fatima Slutzker and Yaakuv Yaakobov, were killed in separate rocket attacks on Sderot in November and several others were injured.

Attacks by Israeli settlers

Israeli settlers in the West Bank repeatedly attacked Palestinians and their property, as well as international peace activists and human rights defenders who sought to document their attacks on Palestinians. Some of the attacks occurred during the olive harvest season, in October and November, when Palestinian farmers attempted to go to their fields close to Israeli settlements and which Israeli settlers sought to prevent them accessing. In June the Israeli Supreme Court issued a ruling instructing the army and police to protect Palestinian farmers seeking to work their land from attacks by settlers. The incidence of such attacks decreased, but several more were carried out, some in the presence of Israeli security forces who failed to intervene.

☞ In the evening of 25 March a group of Israeli settlers assaulted 'Abderrahman Shinneran as he slept in his tent with his wife and three children in Susia in the southern Hebron Hills. When his brother 'Aziz went to his rescue he too was assaulted and injured. b On 18 November, Tove Johansson, a 19-year-old Swedish human rights defender, was assaulted by Israeli settlers as she

accompanied Palestinian school children through an Israeli army checkpoint near the Tel Rumeida Israeli settlement in the West Bank city of Hebron. She was struck with a broken bottle and sustained facial injuries. Israeli soldiers at a nearby checkpoint took no action to stop the attack or apprehend the perpetrators.

Impunity and the administration of justice

In December the Supreme Court rejected a discriminatory law enacted the previous year that denies Palestinian victims compensation for abuses suffered at the hands of Israeli forces. However, impunity remained widespread for Israeli soldiers and settlers responsible for unlawful killings, ill-treatment and other abuses of human rights of Palestinians and attacks against their property. Investigations and prosecutions relating to such abuses were rare and usually only occurred when the abuses were exposed by human rights organizations and the media. By contrast, the Israeli authorities took a range of measures against Palestinians suspected of direct or indirect involvement in attacks against Israelis, including measures such as assassinations, physical abuse and collective punishment that violate international law. Palestinians convicted of involvement in attacks against Israelis were usually sentenced to life imprisonment by Israeli military courts, whereas in the exceptional cases in which Israelis were convicted of killing or abusing Palestinians, Israeli courts imposed lenient sentences.

Thousands of Palestinians, including scores of children, were detained by Israeli forces. Many were arrested during Israeli army operations in the Gaza Strip. The majority of those arrested were released uncharged, but hundreds were accused of security offences. Those detained included dozens of Hamas government ministers and parliamentarians, who were arrested after Palestinian gunmen captured an Israeli soldier in June, apparently to exert pressure for the soldier's release.

Trials of Palestinians before military courts often did not meet international fair trial standards, with allegations of torture and other ill-treatment of detainees inadequately investigated. Hundreds of Palestinians were held in administrative detention without charge or trial; more than 700 were being held at the end of the year. Family visits to some 10,000 Palestinian prisoners were severely restricted as many of their relatives were denied visiting permits.

Imprisonment of conscientious objectors

Several Israelis, both men and women, who refused to serve in the army because they opposed Israel's occupation of the Occupied Territories, were imprisoned for up to four months. They were prisoners of conscience.

✉ Uri Natan, aged 18, served eight consecutive prison sentences totalling five months for refusing to be drafted because of his conscientious objection to Israel's military occupation of the Occupied Territories.

Violations of economic and social rights

Israel continued to expand illegal Israeli settlements and stepped up construction of a 700-km fence/wall, 80 per cent of which runs inside the occupied West Bank, including in and around East Jerusalem. Large areas of Palestinian land were seized and utilized for this purpose. The fence/wall and more than 500 Israeli army checkpoints and blockades throughout the West Bank increasingly confined Palestinians to restricted areas and denied them freedom of movement between towns and villages within the Occupied Territories. Many Palestinians were cut off from their farmland, their main source of livelihood, or could not freely access their workplaces, education, health facilities and other services.

Further discriminatory measures were put in place to enforce the system of segregated roads and checkpoints for Israelis and Palestinians. In November the Israeli army issued an order prohibiting Israelis from using their vehicles to transport Palestinians in the West Bank, where many roads or stretches of road are prohibited to Palestinians and reserved for use by Israelis – mainly the 450,000 Israeli settlers who live in the West Bank. In the Gaza Strip, the Rafah crossing to Egypt, the only entry and exit point for the 1.5 million Palestinian residents, was kept completely or partially closed by the Israeli authorities for most of the year. The passage of goods was similarly restricted by the Israeli authorities' frequent and prolonged closures of the Karni merchandise crossing, the only one they permit.

The damaging impact of the prolonged blockades and movement restrictions was compounded by the Israeli authorities' confiscation of tax duties due to the PA – some US\$50 million a month, equivalent to half of the PA's administration budget. As a result, humanitarian conditions in the Occupied Territories deteriorated to an unprecedented level, marked by a rise in extreme poverty, food aid dependency, high unemployment, malnutrition and other health problems among the Palestinian population.

The destruction of Palestinian infrastructure by Israeli forces caused long-term damage and additional humanitarian challenges. In June the Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip's only power plant, which supplied electricity to half of the area's inhabitants, as well as Israel's destruction of bridges, roads, and water and sewage networks, caused the population to be without electricity for most of the day throughout the hottest months of the year and interfered with water supplies. Israeli forces also bombed and destroyed several PA ministries in the Gaza Strip and other buildings housing charities and institutions reportedly linked to Hamas. These attacks destroyed or damaged scores of residential properties, rendering hundreds of Palestinians homeless.

Other Palestinians were made homeless when Israeli forces bulldozed their houses in the West Bank, including in the East Jerusalem area, on the grounds that they had been built without licences which the Israeli authorities require but make it impossible in those areas for Palestinians to obtain. The same reason was invoked to destroy tens of homes of Israeli Arab Bedouins in unrecognized Bedouin villages in the south of Israel, which the Israeli authorities intend to uproot.

AI country reports/visits

Reports

- Israel/Occupied Territories: Briefing to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (AI Index: MDE 15/002/2006)
- Israel/Lebanon: Out of all proportion – civilians bear the brunt of the war (AI Index: MDE 02/033 /2006)
- Israel/Lebanon: Israel and Hizbullah must spare civilians — Obligations under International Humanitarian Law of the Parties to the Conflict in Israel and Lebanon (AI Index: MDE 15/070/2006)
- Israel/Lebanon: Deliberate destruction or "collateral damage"? — Israeli attacks on civilian infrastructure (AI Index: MDE 18/007/2006)
- Israel and the Occupied Territories: Road to nowhere (AI Index: MDE 15/093/2006)

Visits

AI delegations visited Israel and the Occupied Territories in April, May, August, September, November and December. In December AI's Secretary General headed a delegation that visited Israel and the Occupied Territories and held meetings with the Israeli and PA governments. She expressed concern about the deteriorating human rights situation and urged them to take concrete measures to end impunity and address continuing human rights abuses. AI also called for investigations and reparations for victims of violations during the Hizbullah-Israel war.

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LEBANON

LEBANESE REPUBLIC Head of state: Emile Lahoud Head of government: Fouad Siniora Death penalty: retentionist International Criminal Court: not ratified	
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In a 34-day war in July-August between Hizbullah and Israel, about 1,200 Lebanese people were killed, hundreds of them

children, and around one million were displaced by Israeli attacks. The attacks also destroyed tens of thousands of homes and much civilian infrastructure in Lebanon. At least 20 people were killed and scores injured by Israeli cluster munitions that remained after the conflict. Hizbullah launched missiles into Israel, causing the deaths of 43 civilians and damaging hundreds of buildings. The UN inquiry into the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri continued. Palestinian refugees resident in Lebanon continued to face restrictions, including on access to housing and work, and rights at work. The law continued to discriminate against women and failed to afford them adequate protection against violence.

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Palestinian refugees

Several hundred thousand Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon continued to face wide-ranging restrictions on access to housing, work and rights at work. A law regulating property ownership bans Palestinian refugees from owning property, and the Lebanese authorities prohibit the expansion or renovation of refugee camps. In June, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child criticized persistent discrimination faced by Palestinian children in Lebanon. The Committee expressed concern about the harsh social and economic living conditions of Palestinian refugee children in refugee camps and their limited access to public services, including social and health services and education.

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AI country reports /visits

Reports

- Lebanon: Limitations on Rights of Palestinian Refugee Children, Briefing to the Committee on the Rights of the Child (AI Index: MDE 18/004/2006)

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PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

President: Mahmoud Abbas Prime Minister: Isma'il Haniyeh (replaced Ahmad Qurayin March) Death penalty: retentionist	
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Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) suffered wide-ranging human rights abuses and humanitarian conditions deteriorated significantly due to military and punitive economic actions by Israel, cuts in international aid and growing violence between rival Palestinian political factions. Killings of Palestinians by Israeli forces increased threefold compared to the previous year, totalling more than 650; some of the victims were militants engaged in violence against Israel, but half were unarmed civilians. Palestinian armed groups carried out further attacks on Israelis, killing 27 Israelis, half the previous year's figure, of whom 21 were civilians. Inter-factional violence between rival Palestinian security forces and armed groups increased; some 150 people were killed in gun battles and attacks, including scores of civilian bystanders. Abductions of Palestinians and foreign nationals, notably journalists and aid workers, were frequent. Foreigners were promptly released unharmed, whereas some Palestinians were killed or ill-treated. Impunity remained widespread, with law enforcement and the administration of justice virtually paralysed by inter-factional confrontations.

Background

Inter-factional tensions increased after President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah party, which had ruled the Palestinian Authority (PA) since its establishment more than a decade earlier, was defeated by the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) in parliamentary elections in January. Hamas formed a government, headed by Prime Minister Isma'il Haniyeh, in March. Armed confrontations between rival security forces and armed groups increased as repeated attempts to form a coalition government of national unity failed. In December President Abbas announced his intention to call presidential and parliamentary elections, sparking a new wave of inter-factional fighting.

Following the establishment of a government led by Hamas, which refused to recognize the state of

Israel, the Israeli government began confiscating tax duties due to the PA, and key Western donors ceased direct aid to the PA government on the grounds that they considered Hamas a "terrorist organization". This created a deepening crisis in the Palestinian economy, exacerbated by frequent Israeli military attacks on Palestinian infrastructure and a blockade imposed by Israel on the OPT. The Gaza Strip bore the brunt of the Israeli bombardments and blockade. At the same time, Palestinian armed groups increased their firing of homemade "Qassam" rockets from the Gaza Strip into the south of Israel, notably in the second half of the year.

Deteriorating economic and social conditions

Conditions for Palestinians in the OPT deteriorated throughout the year. Their economic situation was hit hard by Israel's confiscation of import tax duties that it collects on behalf of the PA, half the entire PA government budget; the cut in aid to the PA government by international donors, notably the European Union (EU) and the USA; and banking sanctions imposed by Israel, which prevented the transfer of funds to the Hamas administration. The measures left the PA government, the largest employer in the OPT, unable to pay salaries or deliver health, education and other key services to three and a half million Palestinians living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The international community took no measures to require Israel, as the occupying power, to meet its obligation under international law to ensure the basic humanitarian needs of the Palestinian population. The EU established a Temporary International Mechanism (TIM) in an effort to reduce the humanitarian crisis. However, by the end of the year it was still not fully operational and did not prevent further deterioration of the already overstretched health sector, which could not cope with a growing number of patients. The increased demand was caused by the numerous casualties of Israeli military attacks and the patients who were prevented from seeking treatment abroad by the continuing Israeli blockade on the Gaza Strip.

Education and other crucial public services were similarly affected by the lack of funds, particularly when the PA was unable to pay the salaries of more than 150,000 public sector workers for several months. In September teachers joined other public sector workers striking to protest against the non-payment of their salaries. The education of hundreds of thousands of children was disrupted as a result. In December UN aid agencies launched a US\$450 million emergency appeal in response to the growing needs of the Palestinian population.

Destruction of Palestinian infrastructure by Israeli forces caused long-term damage and a further worsening of living conditions. In June, Israeli forces bombed and badly damaged the Gaza Strip's only power plant, which supplied electricity to half of its 1.5 million inhabitants and left them without electricity for most of the day throughout the hottest months of the year, and often without water that is extracted and distributed using electricity. Israeli forces also bombed bridges, roads, and water and sewage networks. Hundreds of Palestinians were made homeless as scores of buildings were destroyed and damaged by Israeli air strikes and artillery shelling in the Gaza Strip. Other homes were demolished by Israeli bulldozers in the West Bank, including in the East Jerusalem area.

Conflict

Palestinian armed groups launched a growing number of "Qassam" rockets from the Gaza Strip into the south of Israel. These indiscriminate rockets killed two Israeli civilians and injured several others, and caused widespread alarm, although most resulted in no casualties.

The main Palestinian parties, notably Fatah and Hamas, restated their 2005 commitment to refrain from killing Israelis – known as the tahadiyeh (quiet) – but continued to carry out attacks on Israelis together with other groups. However, the number of Israelis killed in such attacks decreased to half the previous year's figure and to the lowest level since the beginning of the intifada in 2000. In total, 21 Israeli civilians, including a child, and six soldiers were killed in Palestinian attacks. The deadliest attack was a suicide bombing claimed by the armed wing of Islamic Jihad on 17 April, which killed 11 civilians and injured 68 others in Tel Aviv. A second suicide attack killed four Israeli settlers, including a 16-year-old child, near the Israeli settlement of Kedumim, in the northern West Bank, on 30 March. The al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, Islamic Jihad and the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC) claimed responsibility for most attacks. In June the armed wing of Hamas and the PRC claimed responsibility for an attack on an Israeli military base near the Gaza Strip in which two soldiers were killed and a

third was captured. Hamas announced that the soldier, Corporal Gilad Shalit, would only be freed in exchange for the release of some of the 10,000 Palestinians in Israeli jails. Negotiations were reportedly ongoing but no exchange of prisoners had been agreed by the end of the year.

Killings of Palestinians by Israeli forces increased threefold compared to the previous years (see Israel and the Occupied Territories entry). Some 650 Palestinians, half of them unarmed civilians and including about 120 children, were killed in Israeli air strikes, artillery shelling and reckless shooting into densely populated refugee camps and residential areas. Israeli forces bombed and destroyed several PA government ministries and other buildings, housing charities and institutions linked to Hamas. Israeli attacks escalated dramatically after the capture of Gilad Shalit in June. Most of the Israeli attacks targeted the Gaza Strip, although scores of Palestinians were also killed in towns and villages throughout the West Bank.

Unlawful killings, lawlessness and impunity

Security forces loyal to the previous PA Fatah administration and the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades and other armed groups linked to Fatah challenged the authority of the new Hamas administration, which set up a new security force made up of its loyalists. Armed confrontations between rival security forces and armed groups were particularly frequent in the Gaza Strip, where family feuds and common law crimes often were intertwined with political violence. Bystanders were frequently caught in the crossfire and scores were killed and injured amid growing lawlessness.

☞ Ten-year old Ousama Ba'lousha and his two brothers, Ahmad and Salam, aged seven and four, were shot dead in Gaza City on their way to school on 11 December, when gunmen opened fire at the car in which they were travelling. The boys' father, a high-ranking officer in the PA intelligence services, had reportedly survived an assassination attempt some months earlier. Fatah and Hamas blamed each other for the killings of the children but the perpetrators were not brought to justice.

The proliferation of unlicensed weapons helped fuel the violence and insecurity. PA law enforcement and judicial authorities were unable or unwilling to carry out their duties. Victims of abuses were denied justice and redress, while the perpetrators of abuses were not held to account. In the West Bank, the Israeli army continued in practice to prevent PA security forces from operating in many areas ostensibly under the jurisdiction of the PA. The economic crisis and the government's inability to pay civil servants and others employed directly by the PA, including members of the security forces, led to strikes and demonstrations, some of which developed into riots such as in June and September when security officials stormed the parliament and ministries, destroying public property.

Abductions and other unlawful killings

Scores of Palestinians and some 20 foreign journalists and aid workers were abducted by Palestinian armed groups, mostly in the Gaza Strip. All the foreign nationals were released unharmed, mostly within hours, but two journalists were held for two weeks in August. The captors usually demanded jobs or political concessions from the PA in exchange for the release of their foreign hostages. Abductions of Palestinians took place in the context of confrontations between rival armed groups, security forces and feuding families, but little information was known about the identities of the victims or the demands made for their release. Most were released, but several were killed, including some who their captors accused of "collaborating" with Israeli security services. Killings of alleged "collaborators" were claimed by or were believed to have been carried out by the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades and other Fatah splinter groups.

Violence against women

Women continued to suffer from the negative impact of the occupation and conflict, including the destruction of homes, increased poverty and movement restrictions that further restricted their access to health services and education. While there were increased demands on women as carers and providers, the deteriorating situation contributed to increased family and societal violence. At least four women were killed by male relatives in "honour" crimes in the Gaza Strip.

☞ In August, Faiza 'Id Abu Sawawin was shot dead in the Gaza Strip, reportedly by a member of her family, for reasons of "family honour". It could not be confirmed whether the man who killed her was detained.

AI country reports/visits

Reports

- Israel/Occupied Territories: Briefing to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (AI Index: MDE 15/002/2006)
- Israel and the Occupied Territories: Road to nowhere (AI Index: MDE 15/093/2006)

Visits

AI delegates visited areas under the jurisdiction of the PA in April, May, June, November and December. In April, they met Prime Minister Haniyeh and other PA government officials and submitted a memorandum detailing AI's concerns and recommending measures to improve human rights in the PA. In December the organization's Secretary General headed a delegation that visited the West Bank and Gaza Strip. She met the PA President and representatives of the Hamas-led government and expressed concern about the deteriorating human rights situation and increasing lawlessness, and called for an end to impunity in the areas under the PA jurisdiction.

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