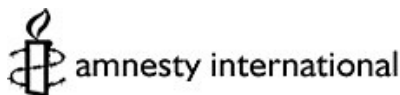


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Gaza ceasefire at risk

A spate of Israeli and Palestinian attacks and counter-attacks in the past 24 hours could spell the end of a five-and-a-half-month ceasefire. This would once again put the civilian populations of Gaza and southern Israel in the line of fire.

The killing of six Palestinian militants in Gaza by Israeli forces in a ground incursion and air strikes on 4 November was followed by a barrage of dozens of Palestinian rockets on nearby towns and villages in the south of Israel. The Palestinian attacks caused no casualties or damage, but there is a real risk that any further armed actions by either side would risk igniting another deadly campaign.

The ceasefire was agreed between Israel and Hamas last June and has been in force since then. It has been the single most important factor in reducing civilian casualties and attacks on civilians to the lowest level since the outbreak of the uprising (intifada) more than eight years ago.

The ceasefire has brought enormous improvements in the quality of life in Sderot and other Israeli villages near Gaza, where before the ceasefire residents lived in fear of the next Palestinian rocket strike. However, nearby in the Gaza Strip the Israeli blockade remains in place and the population has so far seen few dividends from the ceasefire. Since June 2007, the entire population of 1.5 million Palestinians has been trapped in Gaza, with dwindling resources and an economy in ruins. Some 80 percent of the population now depend on the trickle of international aid that the Israeli army allows in.

Before the ceasefire came into force on 19 June 2008, in the first half of the year, some 420 Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces, half of them unarmed civilians, including some 80 children. In the same period, Palestinian armed groups killed 24 Israelis, 15 of them civilians, including four children.

In the past eight years, the Israeli-Palestinian violence has cost the lives of some 4,750 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis. Most of the victims on both sides have been unarmed civilians, including some 900 Palestinian children and 120 Israeli children.

"If the current ceasefire breaks down and daily attacks resume, the civilian populations in both Israel and Gaza will pay the highest price," said Donatella Rovera of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme. "Both sides need to step back from the brink and avoid, at all costs, a return to the vicious spiral of violence which has cost so much in human lives."

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