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First Published 2009-06-19



Widely documented yet no action

Israel brutalizing Palestinian children

Shocking testimonies: bored Israeli soldiers routinely beat Palestinian children for no reason.

By Jonathan Cook - NAZARETH, Israel

The rights of Palestinian children are routinely violated by Israel's security forces, according to a new report that says beatings and torture are common. In addition, hundreds of Palestinian minors are prosecuted by Israel each year without a proper trial and are denied family visits.

The findings by Defence for Children International (DCI) come in the wake of revelations from Israeli soldiers and senior commanders that it is "normal procedure" in the West Bank to terrorise Palestinian civilians, including children.

Col Itai Virob, commander of the Kfir Brigade, disclosed last month that to accomplish a mission, "aggressiveness towards every one of the residents in the village is common". Questioning included slaps, beatings and kickings, he said.

As a result, Gabi Ashkenazi, the head of the armed services, was forced to appear before the Israeli parliament to disavow the behaviour of his soldiers. Beatings were "absolutely prohibited", he told legislators.

Col Virob made his remarks during court testimony in defence of two soldiers, including his deputy commander, who are accused of beating Palestinians in the village of Qaddum, close to Nablus. One told the court that "soldiers are educated towards aggression in the IDF [army]".

Col Virob appeared to confirm his observation, saying it was policy to "disturb the balance" of village life during missions and that the vast majority of assaults were "against uninvolved people".

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Last week, further disclosures of ill-treatment of Palestinians, some as young as 14, were aired on Israeli TV, using material collected by dissident soldiers as part of the Breaking the Silence project, which highlights army brutality.

Two soldiers serving in the Harub battalion said they had witnessed beatings at a school in the West Bank village of Hares, south-west of Nablus, in an operation in March to stop stone-throwing. Many of those held were not involved, the soldiers said.

During a 12-hour operation that began at 3am, 150 detainees were blindfolded and handcuffed from behind, with the nylon restraints so tight their hands turned blue. The worst beatings, the soldiers said, occurred in the school toilets.

According to one soldier's testimony, a boy of about 15 was given "a slap that brought him to the ground". He added that many of his comrades "just knee [Palestinians] because it's boring, because you stand there 10 hours, you're not doing anything, so they beat people up".

The picture from serving soldiers confirms the findings of DCI, which noted that many children were picked up in general sweeps after disturbances or during late-night raids of their homes.

Its report includes a selection of testimonies from children it represented in 2008 in which they describe Israeli soldiers beating them or being tortured by interrogators.

One 10-year-old boy, identified as Ezzat H, described an army search of his family home for a gun. He said a soldier slapped and punched him repeatedly during two hours of questioning, before another soldier pointed a rifle at him: "The rifle barrel was a few centimetres away from my face. I was so terrified that I started to shiver. He made fun of me."

Another boy, Shadi H, aged 15, said he and his friend were forced to undress by soldiers in an orange grove near Tulkarm while the soldiers threw stones at them. They were then beaten with rifle butts.

Jameel K, aged 14, described being taken to a military camp where he was assaulted and then had a rope tightened around his neck in a mock execution.

Yehuda Shaul, of Breaking the Silence, said soldiers treated any Palestinian older than 12 or 13 as an adult.

"For the first time a high-ranking soldier [Col Virob] has joined us in raising the issue -- even if not intentionally -- that the use of physical violence against Palestinians is not exceptional but policy. A few years ago no senior officer would have had the guts to say this," he said.

The DCI report also highlights the systematic use of torture by interrogators from the army and the secret police, the Shin Bet, in an attempt to extract confessions from children, often in cases involving stone-throwing.

Islam M, aged 12, said he was threatened with having boiling water poured on his face if he did not admit throwing stones and was then pushed into a thorn bush. Another boy, Abed S, aged 16, said his hands and feet were tied to the wall of an interrogation room in the shape of a cross for a day and then put in solitary confinement for 15 days.

Last month, the United Nations Committee Against Torture, a panel of independent experts, expressed “deep concern” at Israel’s treatment of Palestinian minors.

According to the DCI report, some 700 children are convicted in Israel’s military courts each year, with children older than 12 denied access to lawyers in interrogation.

It adds that interrogators routinely blindfold and handcuff child detainees during questioning and use techniques including slaps and kicks, sleep deprivation, solitary confinement, threats to the child and his family, and tying the child up for long periods.

Such practices were banned by Israel’s Supreme Court in 1999 but are still widely documented by Israeli human rights groups.

DCI says it has been disturbed by reports from several children of a special tiny cell, referred to as No 36, at a detention centre near Haifa. The cell has no windows or ventilation, its walls are dark and a dim light is kept on 24 hours a day.

In 95 per cent of cases, children are convicted on the basis of signed confessions written in Hebrew, a language few of them understand.

Once sentenced, the children are held in violation of international law in prisons in Israel where most are denied visits from family and receive little or no education.

DCI also criticises “a culture of impunity” among the Shin Bet, noting that not one of 600 complaints of torture filed against its interrogators during the second intifada has led to a criminal investigation.

Yesh Din, an Israeli human rights group, reported in November that soldiers too rarely face disciplinary action over illegal behaviour.

Army data from 2000 to the end of 2007 revealed that the military police had indicted soldiers in only 78 of 1,268 investigations. Most soldiers received minor sentences.

Academic studies suggest that Israeli soldiers have been routinely using violence against Palestinian civilians, including children, for many years.

In late 2007 Israelis were shocked by the testimonies collected by clinical psychologist Nufar Yishai-Karin from 21 soldiers with whom she shared her military service during the early 1990s.

The soldiers told her of incidents in which bystanders were shot or assaulted. In one of the most disturbing testimonies, a soldier said he had witnessed his commander attacking a four-year-old boy playing in the sand in Gaza.

“He broke his hand here at the wrist. Broke his hand at the wrist, broke his leg here. And started to stomp on his stomach, three times, and left ... The next day I go out with him on another patrol, and the soldiers are already starting to do the same thing.”

Such revelations have grown in number since the Breaking the Silence began drawing attention to the army’s mistreatment of Palestinians in 2004.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

