

HRW: Hezbollah Rockets Targeted Civilians in 2006 War / Lebanon Reaction says it's one sided

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Hezbollah rockets, some carrying anti-personnel steel spheres, repeatedly hit populated areas in northern Israel. Human Rights Watch found that numerous rockets were fired in which there was no apparent legitimate military target in the vicinity at the time of the attack, indicating that civilians were deliberately attacked.

Attacks on Northern Israel Violated Laws of War

(Beirut, August 29, 2007) — During the 2006 war, Hezbollah fired thousands of rockets indiscriminately and at times deliberately at civilian areas in northern Israel, killing at least 39 civilians, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today. Human Rights Watch said that Hezbollah's justifications for its attacks on Israeli towns — as a response to indiscriminate Israeli fire into southern Lebanon and to draw Israel into a ground war — had no legal basis under the laws of war.

The 128-page report, "Civilians under Assault: Hezbollah's Rocket Attacks on Israel in the 2006 War," presents more than 20 case studies based on extensive field research in northern Israel into rocket attacks that killed or injured civilians in Jewish, Arab and mixed villages, towns and cities. It also draws evidence of Hezbollah's intent behind these rocket attacks from more than 100 Hezbollah communiqués and declarations.

"Hezbollah's explanations for why it fired rockets at Israel's civilian population utterly fail to justify these unlawful attacks," said Sarah Leah Whitson, director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa division.

In their statements, Hezbollah leaders repeatedly threatened to attack Israeli towns and settlements in retaliation for Israeli attacks on Lebanese towns — a rationale that under international humanitarian law does not justify deliberate or indiscriminate attacks on civilians. Hezbollah also claimed responsibility for specific attacks on Israeli towns and settlements, even as they voiced support for the principle of sparing civilians. Statements by leaders in the military chain of command indicating intent to fire indiscriminately toward civilian areas are evidence of war crimes.

Hezbollah rockets, some carrying anti-personnel steel spheres, repeatedly hit populated areas in northern Israel. Human Rights Watch found that numerous rockets were fired in which there was no apparent legitimate military target in the vicinity at the time of the attack, indicating that civilians were deliberately attacked. For example, hundreds of rockets struck inside Karmiel, Nahariya, and Kiryat Shmona, cities containing no significant military assets. In other cases, a military objective was located in the vicinity, but even assuming that Hezbollah had intended to hit the military target instead of civilians, the inaccurate rockets it used were incapable of distinguishing between the two, making the attack indiscriminate.

Hezbollah rockets killed at least 39 Israeli civilians during the conflict and inflicted moderate or serious injuries on 101 more. They struck three hospitals, an elementary school in Kiryat Yam, and a post office in Haifa. Hezbollah's rocket campaign crippled economic activity and daily life in much of northern Israel, forcing several hundred thousand civilians either to flee south or to hide in shelters and "safe rooms."

Hezbollah stated that it targeted and hit Israeli military objectives more than is known, and blamed Israeli censorship for covering up the extent of such attacks. However, Hezbollah attacks on legitimate military objectives, whatever their extent, do not justify the attacks that were indiscriminate or deliberately targeted civilians.

Hezbollah forces fired long-range, unguided rockets, referred to as "Katyushas" that were highly inaccurate and could not distinguish between civilians and military objectives. Fired toward cities and towns, such attacks showed, at minimum, a reckless disregard for civilians, and frequently hit civilians and civilian objects deliberately or indiscriminately.

Many rockets that hit the most densely populated coastal areas — the city of Haifa and the string of its suburbs to the north and east known as HaKrayot — were 220 millimeter rockets packed with thousands of 6 millimeter steel spheres that when released in an explosion are devastating anti-personnel weapons. Incapable of inflicting serious

damage to hard military structures or materiel, they penetrate human flesh and organs within a wide radius of the warhead blast. Hezbollah also fired into civilian areas cluster munition rockets loaded with submunitions that are designed to disperse, on impact, 3 millimeter steel spheres over a wide area. The Israel Police says that it examined 118 rocket strikes with cluster munitions.

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In other reports, Human Rights Watch has addressed other aspects of the conflict, including violations by Israel in its conduct of hostilities. A major Human Rights Watch study, titled "Why They Died: Civilian Deaths in Lebanon during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War," will be released in September. Human Rights Watch at all times measures each party's compliance with its obligations under the laws of war, rather than compare the behavior of one side with the conduct of other parties to the conflict. Under those laws, violations by one party to a conflict do not excuse or mitigate violations committed by the other.

In "Civilians under Assault," Human Rights Watch urges Hezbollah, as a matter of practice and doctrine, to cease all attacks that deliberately target civilians, as well as those that cannot discriminate between civilians and combatants, and to renounce publicly the argument that attacks on Israeli civilians are permissible as reprisals for Israeli attacks on Lebanese civilians. The report calls on the government of Lebanon to interdict the delivery of rockets to Hezbollah so long as it uses them, or subscribes to a doctrine that would permit use of them, to fire deliberately or indiscriminately into civilian areas.

The report also urges the governments of Syria and Iran not to permit the transfer to Hezbollah of materiel, including rockets that Hezbollah has used in violation of international humanitarian law.

Human Rights Watch said that in some instances Israel located its own fixed and mobile military assets in or near civilian areas of northern Israel, raising questions of whether it complied fully with the norm requiring it to avoid, to the extent feasible, locating military objectives within or near densely populated areas and to adequately protect all citizens residing near military assets. While this practice did not diminish Hezbollah's responsibility to discriminate at all times between noncombatants and legitimate military targets, Human Rights Watch urges the government of Israel to take all feasible steps to locate military objectives away from densely populated areas and to ensure adequate measures to protect all civilians, on an equal basis, who may be at increased risk of enemy fire due to their proximity to Israeli military assets.

Finally, noting that both the Lebanese and Israeli governments have failed so far to investigate violations of international humanitarian law committed in the course of the 2006 war, Human Rights Watch recommends that the United Nations secretary-general establish an international commission of inquiry to investigate reports of violations of international humanitarian law, including possible war crimes, in Lebanon and Israel and to formulate recommendations with a view to holding accountable those who violated the law.

"Hezbollah, like Israel, must respect the laws of war," said Whitson. "Unless those responsible on both sides are held accountable for their actions, instead of being allowed to hide behind the violations of their adversary, we fear that civilians inevitably will continue to pay a costly price."

<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/08/30/lebano16740.htm>

Lebanon Slams Human Rights Report on Hizbullah-Israel War

The Lebanese government and Hizbullah on Wednesday lashed out at a report by the Human Rights Watch which criticized the Shiite group's attacks on Israel during last year's summer war, saying the document was a complete distortion of facts.

The Human Rights Watch (HRW) report due for release on Thursday focuses on the extent "Hizbullah targeted or indiscriminately fired its rockets toward civilians and civilian objects" during the 34-day war, said a statement released by the New York-based group.

But even before the release of the report and a planned press conference by HRW in Beirut on Thursday, Hizbullah and Prime Minister Fouad Saniora were scathing in their criticism.

"During the attacks of July 2006, Israel violated all international conventions," Saniora's office said in a statement.

"It killed nearly 1,200 Lebanese and injured thousands more and 72 hours after U.N. Resolution 1701 was adopted, it dropped 3.5 million cluster bombs in the south of the country," the statement added.

Resolution 1701 which halted the devastating month-long conflict which began July 12 after Hizbullah launched a cross-border attack on Israel and kidnapped two soldiers, whose fate is still unknown.

Hizbullah spokesman Hussein Rahal said Human Rights Watch should start by criticizing Israel.

"We were the victims during this war and people have a right to defend themselves," he told AFP. "We did not target civilians but Israel on the other hand did target the civilian population in Lebanon."

Nadim Houry, a researcher for Human Rights Watch in Lebanon, brushed aside the criticism, saying the report was aimed at shedding light on atrocities committed against civilians during the war.

He said HRW planned to release on September 6 another report documenting Israeli attacks that killed civilians in Lebanon.

"We don't take sides about who is right and who is wrong and our primary focus in this conflict has been to protect civilians," Houry told AFP.

He said it was unclear, in light of the criticism and threats of demonstrations, whether HRW would still hold the press conference scheduled for Thursday.

"Our main goal was to have a debate on this issue and it is distressing that we can't have this debate in Beirut," he said. (AFP-Naharnet)

from Naharnet, Beirut, 29 Aug 07, 10:40

<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&41A42BECF845DCD4C22573470027CFED>

Siniora, Hizbullah criticize HRW report on 2006 war
Hotel cancels rights group's news conference

Daily Star staff
Thursday, August 30, 2007

BEIRUT: Human Rights Watch (HRW) canceled a news conference expected on Thursday to issue its report on Hizbullah's attacks on Israel during last summer's war following condemnations from the Lebanese government and Hizbullah. A statement issued by HRW said: "The press conference was canceled after reports by Hizbullah-controlled media about planned demonstrations to prevent the scheduled event at the Crowne Plaza hotel, and the hotel's decision to disallow the news conference. "

The 128-page report focuses on the extent "Hizbullah targeted or indiscriminately fired its rockets toward civilians and civilian objects" during the war, according to a statement by the New York-based rights group.

But even before the release of the report, Hizbullah and Prime Minister Fouad Siniora were scathing in their criticism.

Hussein Rahhal, head of Hizbullah's media unit, said there was a "distortion of facts" in the report.

"We were targeting soldiers and military bases principally but Israel's main direct targets were civilians. Civilian casualties inflicted by us were indirect," he said.

Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora also criticized HRW. "It is impermissible to put the killers and the killed on the same level," he said in remarks published on Wednesday.

The government also rejected recommendations in the HRW report that Hizbullah members be judged for war crimes.

"It is unacceptable because this has no legal basis and this organization should not adopt such a stand considering it should remain impartial and objective," it said in a statement.

"Hizbullah is trying to silence criticism of its conduct during the 2006 war," said Sarah Leah Whitson, director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa division. "But the fairness and accuracy of our reporting will speak for themselves, whether we hold a press conference or not."

"Our focus is on the protection of civilians wherever they may be, and not about taking sides in a conflict," said Whitson.

In the report, HRW said it "found that numerous rockets were fired in which there was no apparent legitimate target in the vicinity at the time of the attack, indicating that civilians were deliberately attacked."

Houry also brushed aside the criticism, saying the report was aimed at shedding light on atrocities committed against civilians during the war.

He added that HRW planned to release on September 6 in Occupied Jerusalem a report critical of Israel's conduct in its attacks on Lebanon, a comprehensive follow-up to a report released during the war, titled "Fatal Strikes: Israel's Indiscriminate Attacks Against Civilians in Lebanon."

The 2006 war killed more than 1,200 people in Lebanon, mostly civilians, and more than 160 in Israel, of them at least 39 civilians, according to HRW.

"We don't take sides about who is right and who is wrong and our primary focus in this conflict has been to protect civilians," Houry said.

He said it was unfortunate that those criticizing the report had failed to take into account the extensive work done by HRW on violations carried out by Israel during the war.

"We were the first ones to document the use of cluster munitions by Israel," he said.

"Our main goal was to have a debate on this issue and it is distressing that we can't have this debate in Beirut," he said.

Hizbullah's Al-Manar television led its news broadcasts with reports containing scathing criticism of HRW.

HRW sent to Al-Manar's editor a letter in response to what it called "the misinformation contained in today's newscast and on the Al Manar Web site."

HRW said it "requests that the editor post online a correction of misinformation in the article, dated August 28, 2007, under the title "Who Has Incited the Holding of a Conference in Beirut to Criticize the Attacks by the Resistance?"

HRW said that contrary to the article's claims, it "has no connection whatsoever - nor does it coordinate its actions - with any political party or movement in Lebanon or in any of the other 70 countries in which we work."

It said that it "has scheduled a press conference on September 6 in Jerusalem to present a new report on laws of war violations during Israel's attacks in Lebanon during the 2006 war."

HRW said that while preparing the report, it repeatedly sought meetings with Hizbullah officials and solicited information in writing, with no substantive response. -

http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=84923

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