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**ISRAELI SOLDIERS PROVIDE SHOCKING TESTIMONY****Report Paints Damning Picture of Gaza Campaign***By Christoph Schult in Jerusalem*

**Israel has claimed that everything was done to protect innocent lives during its recent military operation in the Gaza Strip. But according to statements from Israeli soldiers there were malicious acts of destruction, white phosphorus was used and civilians were deliberately targeted.**

The report is an account of acts of brutality. The Israeli human rights organization Breaking the Silence spent several months interviewing veterans of the Gaza war that took place in January of this year. The responses by 54 of the veterans paint a completely different picture of Israel's campaign against the Islamist organization Hamas from that provided by the Israeli military leadership. According to the report, the commanders hammered it into their soldiers that they were not to show any consideration for the Palestinian civilian population, so as not to risk the lives of Israeli troops.

The statements by reservists, conscripts, soldiers and officers, which are consistent with and reinforce each other, substantiate for the first time the suspicion that the Israeli military in many cases ignored one of the basic tenets of the international laws of war: the distinction between combatants and innocent bystanders. The three-week war claimed the lives of about 1,400 Palestinians, many if not most of them civilians.

According to the report by Breaking the Silence, Hamas's cynical conduct of war can no longer be solely blamed for the large number of civilian casualties. The Islamists deployed their fighters in densely populated areas, making it difficult for the Israelis to distinguish between Hamas soldiers and civilians. Many of the wounded and dead are clearly the result of a lesson Israel learned in the Lebanon war of 2006: no hesitation, no scruples.

One of the characteristic elements of the report is how similarly the soldiers describe the briefings given by their commanding officers on the eve of the war. "Before the first time we went in," one veteran says, "the battalion commander had us all stand in formation on Friday evening and said: 'We cannot surprise them with our timing, they know when. We cannot surprise them with our location, they know exactly where we're coming in. What we do have...is fire power.'"

"And in fact," the soldier continues, "all that fire power, what with Air Force, artillery, armored corps and the quantity of infantry that went in, the awareness of each soldier going in is simple ... a light finger on the trigger. You see something and you're not quite sure? You shoot."

The Israeli army used flyers and telephone calls to warn the civilian population in the target region. But those who were unable to flee, because they were too sick or too old, were left in mortal danger. "If beyond this line any people are detected -- they are not supposed to be there," recalls one soldier. "If we detect anything that should not be there -- we shoot. No special mention was made of innocents."

"Fire power was insane," another Gaza veteran recalls. "We went in and the booms were just mad. You see a house, a window, shoot at the window. You don't see a terrorist there? Fire at the window. It was real urban warfare. In urban warfare, anyone is your enemy. No innocents."

A number of soldiers report that the standard procedure was to fire shots when they entered residential buildings, an approach known in Israeli military jargon as "wet entry" (as opposed to "dry entry," which is without shooting). "All entries were 'wet,'" says one soldier. "There was no such thing any more as a 'dry'

entry. Missiles, tank fire, machine gun fire onto the house, grenades. Shoot as we enter a room. The idea was that when we enter a house, no one there could fire at us." Another soldier reports how his unit, using this approach, killed an older man who had taken cover under a staircase with his family.

If the reports are true, fundamental rules designed to protect civilians were even deliberately ignored at times. One night, reports a soldier, he was keeping watch over a street with his unit from the vantage point of a building. A person approached them carrying a flashlight. The soldiers asked the company leader for permission to fire a warning shot. Instead, the commander sent snipers onto the roof. When the man was about 80 meters (262 feet) away, the soldiers asked again for permission to fire a warning shot, but the commanding officer refused to give it. When the man was about 25 meters away, the snipers opened fire.

When asked why he refused to allow warning shots, the commander responds: "It's nighttime and this is a terrorist." The next day, dogs were sent out to inspect the body for explosives -- and found nothing. The victim was merely an old man with a beard carrying a flashlight.

Some veterans also confirm that the army sent local residents into houses where Hamas fighters were holed up, as a kind of vanguard. This method, known as the "neighbor procedure," is expressly banned in Israel. According to one soldier, his unit placed a gun barrel on the shoulder of a Palestinian and forced him to walk ahead of them into a suspicious building. If this is true, Hamas fighters were not the only ones who misused civilians as human shields.

Reading the reports also helps to explain the images of the devastation caused in Gaza by the war. It was not only buildings from which Hamas fighters were shooting that were leveled to the ground, but also other buildings that simply appeared to be suspicious. They were either bombed from the air or tank units demolished them with earthmoving equipment. "Usually house demolition is not something you do a lot," says the driver of a D-9, a powerful, armored bulldozer as tall as a two-story building. "We demolished a lot. If I remember correctly, from the battalion commander's talk at the end, he said: 'We demolished 900 houses.'"

The eyewitnesses also report the use of weapons which are controversial under international law. Several veterans confirm that the Israelis used white phosphorus, which falls to the earth like rain and inflicts serious burns on people. One soldier describes how an area of 200 to 300 square kilometers (77 to 115 square miles) was littered with the shard-like, dirty-brown remnants of white phosphorus. "Until that moment, I had thought that I belonged to the most humane army in the world. In training, you learn that white phosphorus is not used, and you are taught that it's not humane."

As early as February, Amos Harel, the military expert with the Israeli daily newspaper *Haaretz*, disclosed similar reports by Gaza veterans. This prompted the military prosecutor to launch a criminal investigation, but it was discontinued a few days later. Now it looks as though the army's top criminal prosecutor will have a new task. Michael Sfar, a human rights attorney in Tel Aviv, has even spoken of war crimes.

*Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan*

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