

Five years of child rights abuses in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

Five years ago today, massive protests against the ongoing Israeli occupation erupted throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). Since that day in September 2000, the systematic and daily violations of the rights of Palestinians in general and of Palestinian children in particular, have intensified profoundly.

Children too young to walk or speak have been shot dead, thousands have been injured, still more have looked on horrified as friends and family members have been killed, maimed, arrested, humiliated. Schools and homes have been demolished, hospitals destroyed. A vast array of discriminatory and illegal movement restrictions including closures, curfews, checkpoints and roadblocks have been imposed on the Palestinian residents of the OPT, plunging the Palestinian economy further and further into crisis.

But despite clear evidence and wide international recognition that Israel bears full responsibility for the appalling circumstances in which many Palestinians find themselves, the Israeli authorities have done nothing to redress the situation. On the contrary, as the continued illegal construction of the Wall illustrates, Israel has no qualms in flagrantly ignoring international human rights and humanitarian law whenever it suits its own narrowly defined national interest.

According to documentation collected by Defence for Children International/Palestine Section (DCI/PS), at least 720 Palestinian children have been killed since the start of the intifada and hundreds more left permanently disabled by injuries they sustained at the hands of the Israeli military. In the past five years, over 3,000 children have been arrested by Israeli forces and some 300 remain incarcerated – the majority held in prisons inside Israel in direct contravention of international law. Since the intifada began, education in the OPT has become a daily struggle rather than a basic right. Israeli policies such as curfews and closures as well as military bombardments have systematically targeted the Palestinian education system, forcing children across the West Bank and Gaza to miss hundreds of school days. Such actions not only disrupt the lives of students but have a devastating impact on the future development of Palestinian society as a whole.

Recent months have seen Israel implement its much touted disengagement from the Gaza Strip. In August, occupation forces evacuated the illegal settlements and the Israeli troops that for more than 38 years controlled the strip withdrew. But despite the unprecedented media coverage it received, the disengagement does not relinquish Israel from its responsibilities under international law as an occupying power. As such, Israel is obliged to respect the rights of among others all children living in the Gaza Strip. Instead however, within weeks of withdrawing, Israeli military fighter planes and tanks have been bombarding residential districts up and down the strip, targeting civilians, their property and other civil infrastructure – missiles reduced to rubble parts of the Dar al Arqum school in Gaza which provided education for 1,200 students and the Taghreed Foundation for Arts & Culture in Beit Hanoun. Children of all ages are terrified and traumatized by the new Israeli onslaught which illustrates just how insincere talk of Israeli military withdrawal of Gaza really is.

The violations of Palestinian children's rights that have taken place over the past half decade are but an intensification of the systematic and gross child rights abuses that go hand in hand with Israeli policies governing its 38-year occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. In an initial step to ease the suffering of Palestinian children, it is essential that

Israel, as the occupying power, be forced to respect the rights of all children under its jurisdiction, whether this jurisdiction is legal or illegal. In the long-run however, the only way that Palestinian children can be ensured the possibility of enjoying their basic rights and fulfilling their basic needs is within the context the Palestinian people achieving their right to self-determination, freedom and justice.

DCI/PS therefore appeals to the international community and world leaders to abide by their declared commitment to protect the rights of all children, including the children of Palestine. We urge them to bring pressure on the Israeli government, to abide by international law and end the occupation which is incompatible with any declared commitment to promoting and protecting the basic human rights of all. The past five years have seen an unprecedented level of death and destruction in the OPT, it is up to us to ensure the coming years hold out the opportunity for a better future for Palestinian children.

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For further information please contact DCI/PS at info@dcj-pal.org or go to www.dci-pal.org