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Comment

Snipers with children in their sights

Palestinian civilians have been killed by the army with impunity

Chris McGreal
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[The Guardian](#)

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It was the shooting of Asma Mughayar that swept away any lingering doubts I had about how it is the Israeli army kills so many Palestinian children and civilians.

Asma, 16, and her younger brother, Ahmad, were collecting laundry from the roof of their home in the south of the Gaza Strip in May last year when they were felled by an Israeli army sniper. Neither child was armed or threatening the soldier, who fired unseen through a hole punched in the wall of a neighbouring block of flats.

The army said the two were blown up by a Palestinian bomb planted to kill soldiers. The corpses offered a different account. In Rafah's morgue, Asma lay with a single bullet hole through her temple; her 13-year-old brother had a lone shot to his forehead. There were no other injuries, certainly none consistent with a blast.

Confronted with this, the army changed its account and claimed the pair were killed by a Palestinian, though there was persuasive evidence pointing to the Israeli sniper's nest. What the military did not do was ask its

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soldiers why they gave a false account of the deaths or speak to the children's parents or any other witnesses.

When reporters pressed the issue, the army promised a full investigation, but a few weeks later it was quietly dropped. This has become the norm in a military that appears to value protecting itself from accountability more than living up to its claim to be the "most moral army in the world".

As Tom Hurndall's parents noted yesterday after the conviction of an Israeli sergeant for the manslaughter of their son, the soldier was put on trial only because the British family had the resources to bring pressure to bear. But there has been no justice for the parents of hundreds of Palestinian children killed by Israeli soldiers.

According to the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, the army has killed 1,722 Palestinian civilians - more than one-third of them minors - as well as 1,519 combatants, since the intifada began nearly five years ago; the comparable Israeli figures are 658 civilians killed - 17% minors - along with 309 military. The army has investigated just 90 Palestinian deaths, usually under outside pressure. Seven soldiers have been convicted: three for manslaughter, none for murder.

Last month, a military court sentenced a soldier to 20 months in prison for shooting dead a Palestinian man as he adjusted his TV aerial, the longest sentence yet for killing a civilian, and less than Israeli conscientious objectors have got for refusing to serve in the army.

B'Tselem argues that a lack of accountability and rules of engagement that "encourage a trigger-happy attitude among soldiers" have created a "culture of impunity" - a view backed by the New York-based Human Rights Watch, which last week described many army investigations of civilian killings as a "sham ... that encourages soldiers to

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think they can literally get away with murder".

In southern Gaza, the killings take place in a climate that amounts to a form of terror against the population. Random fire into Rafah and Khan Yunis has claimed hundreds of lives, including five children shot as they sat at their school desks. Many others have died when the snipers must have known who was in their sights - children playing football, sitting outside home, walking back from school. Almost always "investigations" amount to asking the soldier who pulled the trigger what happened - often they claim there was a gun battle when there was none - and presenting it as fact.

The military police launched an investigation into the death of Iman al-Hams last October only after soldiers went public about the circumstances in which their commander emptied his gun into the 12-year-old. He was recorded telling his men that the girl should be killed even if she were three.

Colonel Pinhas Zuretz was commander in southern Gaza two years ago when I asked him about the scale of the killing. The colonel, who rewrote the rules of engagement to permit soldiers to shoot children as young as 14, acknowledged that official versions of several killings were wrong, but justified the tactics as the price of the struggle for survival against a second Holocaust.

Perhaps that view was shared by the soldier who shot dead three 15-year-old boys, Hassan Abu Zeid, Ashraf Mousa and Khaled Ghanem, as they approached the fortified border between Gaza and Egypt in April. The military said the teenagers were weapons smugglers and therefore "terrorists", and that the soldier shot them in the legs and only killed them when they failed to stop.

The account was a fabrication. The

teenagers were in a "forbidden zone" but kicking a ball. Their corpses showed no evidence of wounds to disable them, only single high-calibre shots to the head or back. The army quietly admitted as much - but there would be no investigation.

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