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Israelis accused of 'human shields' tactic

 By Lucy Williamson
 BBC News, Gaza

The Israeli army has been accused of using Palestinian civilians as human shields in an operation in northern Gaza.

According to the Israeli human rights group, B'tselem, six civilians including two minors were subjected to the illegal tactic during an incursion into the town of Beit Hanoun last week.

There are piles of rubble leading up to the hole in Hazem Ali's house.



Hazem Ali says he was subjected to a terrifying 12-hour ordeal

It's a week since Israel came into Beit Hanoun, but the gash in the side of his house is still raw, the soft inside of family life still visible through the lumps of concrete hanging from the wall. A broken bed; a few girders dripping onto it; an elegant wardrobe still standing against the back wall.

It was soon after dawn when the Israeli army bulldozed their way in. Hazem was still sleeping, taking a break from his job as an engineer with the local Palestinian news agency.

'Blindfolded'

It was his mother who met them in the hallway, Israeli soldiers in a Palestinian home. Behind her, Hazem and his two brothers emerged, one by one.

The three brothers were blindfolded, says Hazem, and their hands tied behind their backs. He shows me the wounds on his wrists from the plastic handcuffs - still sore and infected, but beginning to heal over.

He shows me where the soldiers positioned them: outside the entrance to his flat on the third floor, in the stairwell, facing down the steps.

"I think they put us here because they were expecting suiciders to come into the flat because none of the soldiers were on the stairs - they were all inside the flat. They put us here so we'll be shot first."

Inside the flat, the soldiers punched holes in the walls of



The wounds are healing

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his living room, and bedroom.

Through them, snipers exchanged fire with Palestinian militants. Hazem and his brothers heard it all, but could see nothing.

Hazem says he had little idea at the time exactly how long he was kept there. All he remembers was listening to the heavy gunfire around him, and counting the calls to prayer as they echoed over the area: one at lunchtime, one at tea-time, and one in the evening as the sun set. Twelve hours in all.

He says he expected to die any second. He still can't understand why, as civilians, they couldn't be kept in a room somewhere inside the house, where they would have been safer. But they put us in the middle of the clashes, he says. "There was no need for that."

Court outlawed tactic

Allegations over Israel's use of human shields have surfaced before. The last time they made headlines was during Operation Defensive Shield in the West Bank town of Jenin, four years ago.

The army denied its personnel systematically used civilians as human shields during that operation, but it did issue an order outlawing the practice. As did the Israeli High Court.

“ This was a very blatant violation of the prohibition of the use of human shields ”

Yekhezal Lain, B'tselem

But Yekhezal Lain, research director with the Israeli human rights group B'tselem says they are worried those guarantees are now being eroded. He says the cases in Beit Hanoun last week are the first of their kind since the High Court decision.

"This was a very blatant violation of the prohibition of the use of human shields," he tells me. "It was just soldiers hiding behind the back of civilians who were held with force in their homes."

B'tselem says it is investigating reports of other, similar incidents in Gaza during the past month. And it is worried that - having withdrawn from Gaza last year - the Israeli army may see the area as distinct from other Palestinian Territories.

The group is concerned about Israel establishing different rules in the case of the Gaza Strip where according to the state, there is no occupation any more - it's only a state of war, or armed conflict. The human rights group does not believe there is a difference when it comes to the protection of civilians.

The IDF told the BBC the claims in Beit Hanoun were being investigated, and that its soldiers were obliged to act in accordance with moral principles and the rules of engagement. Any misconduct, they said, would be looked into.

As he waits for news of his case in Beit Hanoun, Hazem Ali has got the builders in to fill the holes in his flat, re-glaze his windows and repair as much of the damage as he can.

His wife, meanwhile, is preparing for the birth of their first child. She is half Egyptian, and has been asking Hazem to move out of the Gaza Strip for months now. But he refuses to leave. There's no running away from Gaza, he says.

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